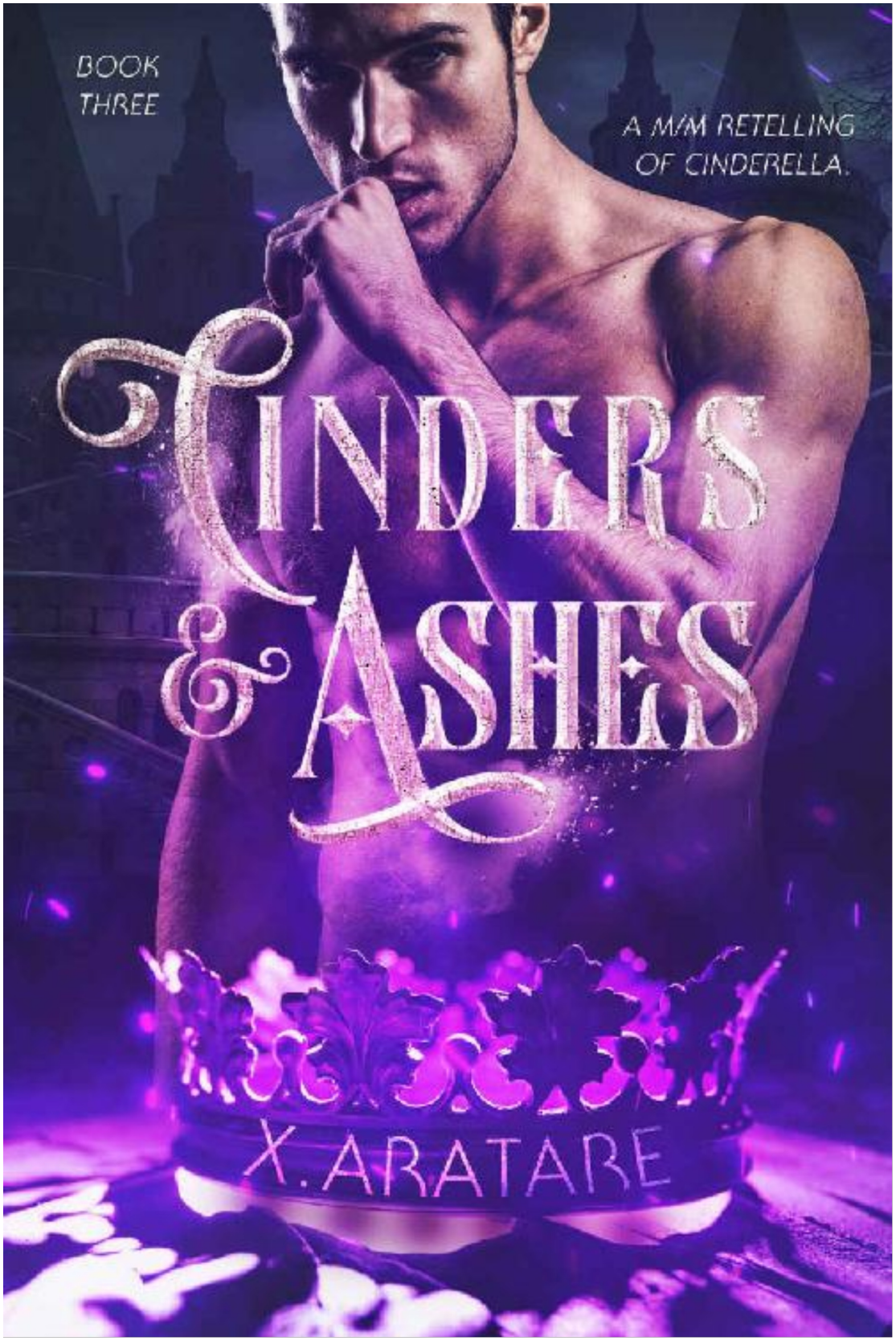
BOOK
THREE
A M/M RETELLING
OF CINDERELLA.
CINDERS
& ASHES
X. ARATARE

CINDERS & ASHES

A GAY RETELLING OF CINDERELLA (BOOK 3)

X. ARATARE

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WHAT'S HAPPENED SO FAR?

In *Cinders & Ashes* Book 1, Finn Ashton is a servant on his own estate, serving the needs of his obnoxious stepfamily. His stepfather, Lord Gerard Steward, is desperate to gain social approval and marry his two sons, Christopher and Miles, off to nobility. But due to his the son of a merchant, he is seen as a social climber and would be ignored except for the fact that Tanglewood Manor is the most fertile of any in the Kingdom of Rirea. That fertility is due to Finn's magical abilities.

Finn is a half-blood Fae. His mother was (mostly) human but his unknown father was Fae. Finn has no idea who his father is and claims not to care. But he did give Finn the ability to drain life, mix it with his magic and cause the estate to bloom. He has done this every year since his mother's death when he was but 5 years old. The same death that revealed his magic and his Fae heritage. Since the deaths of the prior king and queen of Rirea allegedly by the Fae King Thalanil Ravenspar's hands, all Fae found in Rirea have been put to death due to suspicions that they have loyalty to King Thalanil. Finn's stepfamily has agreed to keep his Fae blood secret in exchange for him serving them, making the estate bloom and never seeking the title of Lord of Tanglewood.

However, this year, there is so little life in Rirea that Finn is unable to honor his promise to make the estate fertile. Desperate for his stepfamily to keep his secret, Finn steals life from the Fae side of the Wall. The Wall is a magical structure that divides the human Kingdom of Rirea from the Fae Empire of the Eclipse Throne. It was erected right after the deaths of the human regents. Finn hopes this small amount of stolen life won't be noticed but his hope is a vain one.

As a "reward" for making Tanglewood bloom, Finn's stepfamily gives him a half day off to spend mostly as he wishes. He goes into the Lupine Woods only to find a beautiful man being dragged by his horse and evidence that the Fae are aware of the stolen life.

Little does Finn know that the man he rescues is, in fact, King Rohan De Clare, King of Rirea. Rohan has as many troubles as Finn. He knows that his kingdom is dying and suspects that the Wall is draining all the fertility from the soil and changing the normal animals into monsters. His uncle urges him to consider marrying one of the nearby kings or queens to get Rirea some relief, but Rohan does not wish to surrender Rirea's independence, nor his *own*.

His uncle then suggests he, instead, have a meeting with all of the surrounding kingdoms, including the war-like and dangerous Achuviel Kingdom and its King Tearlach. That suits Rohan better as, after a magical afternoon with Finn, he cannot imagine wanting anyone but the bewitching young man with the green eyes.

Confessing his love affair to the Captain of the Guard Leonid Blanchet and his noble companion Lord Serxio Lemos, the three of them head out into the Lupine Woods to the cabin where Finn and Rohan have agreed to meet again. The goal is to

spruce up the hovel for a romantic picnic. But things do not go at all as planned.

For his part, Finn has found a new lease on life after his afternoon with the amazing Rohan, who he believes to be a simple noble lord and *not* the King of Rirea due to a misunderstanding and lie that Rohan builds upon. Finn's time is not his own as a servant, but he is determined to see Rohan again. His eldest step brother, Christopher, though appears to intuit that something is going on with Finn. The two of them make a deal that Finn will help Christopher with his potions meant to restore Rirea's soil in exchange for keeping silent about whatever Finn's getting up to.

But, to Finn's dismay, the next day Christopher and Miles insist on coming into the woods with him to look for herbs for Christopher's experiments. Finn had hoped to grab the herbs and go to the cabin to meet Rohan, but now he is stuck with his step brothers.

As if things could not get more complicated for Rohan and Finn, the two parties meet each other in the woods. They must pretend not to know one another. Christopher, though, seems to recognize Rohan from somewhere. But before any secrets can get betrayed, a section of the Wall lowers and they all see the king of wolves, Tyreon looking at them. When Tyreon begins to move--a move that will lead to an attack in Rohan's eyes--Rohan draws his crossbow and fires, but Finn jumps between the bolt and the wolf. For Finn has dreamed of the great white wolf and knows he means no harm to them.

Finn is struck by the bolt. It goes cleanly through his side. Tyreon drags Finn's unconscious body to the Fae side of the Wall. While Christopher and Miles run away, Rohan, Serxio and Leonid ride after Finn and Tyreon. While they manage to scare off the king of wolves, when they go to bring back a wounded Finn to the Rirean side of the Wall, they find that the Wall is once again intact and there is no way home.

In *Cinders & Ashes* Book 2, the book opens up with King Thalanil Ravenspar, the ruler of the Fae Empire of the Eclipse Throne, standing on one of Aymar's towers. He has sensed someone draining life from his land and worries that it is his elder brother Marikoth, a Death Mage, who was exiled from the Empire and has found a way around the Wall to strike at him. He had thought that Marikoth was killed by their father long ago, but he was not.

Like all Death Mages, Marikoth killed their mother, potentially accidentally, when he came into his power. This act made their father believe that the prophecy that if a Death Mage is allowed to live they will bring about the end of the Empire. But, out of love, their father merely exiled Marikoth and now the danger he poses continues.

But even as Thalanil is haunted by his elder brother's continued existence, he is haunted more by the love he lost. Maeve Ashton, Finn's mother, was the love of Thalanil's eternal life. She ended their relationship without any explanation. The last conversation they'd was an argument about whether Death Mages should be killed simply based on a prophecy. Thalanil stated emphatically he would kill any son or daughter of his that showed the signs. Holding a hand against her stomach protectively, Maeve violently disagreed. And that was the last he saw of her.

Thalanil is left alone on the tower of Aymar with an exiled brother and a dead lover and no one and nothing to love.

Next, we turn to Rohan and Finn. These two lovers are separated. Finn's wound from the spelled silver bolt requires a Fae healer and Rohan is intent on finding one. The Wall remains in place and there is no sign of Tyreon, King of the Wolves, to take it down again. The only way to save Finn is on this side of the Wall. He and

Serxio seek out a nearby village in the Empire leaving Leonid to watch over an unconscious Finn. But Rohan and Serxio find more than what they bargained for!

The Fae village is surrounded by a magical fence and Battle Mages patrol the area making it impossible for Rohan and Serxio to get inside. The need for the magical fence becomes apparent to both men as the forest is not only very alive but antagonistic with vines constantly curling around ankles or wrists.

While they are trying to figure out how to get into the village and find a healer, a group of Fae and humans exit it. The humans are bound wrist and ankle with chains. They are led to a standing stone out in the forest, secured to it, and seemingly left there for some terrible fate. Rohan and Serxio decide that they must rescue these poor people. As Rohan is cutting through their chains with his magical sword, Lightbringer, something stirs in the forest.

Spiders.

Giant spiders.

Including one named Hex, which is so large as to more resemble an elephant in size than a spider at all. Rohan sends Serxio and one of the few freed humans, Thomas, to go back to the village and gain the help of Thomas' mistress, a Fae healer, for Finn while Rohan continues to free the chained humans and faces Hex. While Serxio, reluctantly, and Thomas, eagerly, run away, Rohan battles Hex. As he does so, Lightbringer's power seems to grow and change with Rohan feeling that he and the sword have become *one*.

Rohan is successful in his battle with Hex but only one of the humans survives it, a woman named Emma. She had earlier warned him that Thomas "has no honor" and she is more than right. Thomas and Serxio return with Thomas' mistress, a Fae priestess named Ryleth, but Serxio is in chains and Ryleth, far from being pleased that Rohan has killed Hex, claims that he has sentenced everyone in her village to death. She sends a bolt of magic at Rohan, sending him into unconsciousness.

In the meantime, Finn is dreaming, but thinks he is awake. He is in the Lupine Woods. He is searching for Rohan and the cabin where they were to meet that day to have a picnic. But no matter what direction he goes all he finds are more trees and no cabin. He feels feverish and weak, along with occasional sharp pains in his side, as if he is suffering from a great illness. But has no recollection of being shot by Rohan or of the events that led to him being dragged into the Empire.

Eventually, Finn does find the cabin, but things are still strange. The woods around the cabin form an impenetrable wall as soon as he enters the clearing. The grass there is sweet and not poisoned. There are signs of occupation in the cabin, but Finn fears it is someone other than Rohan. His illness increases.

But all seems to get better when Rohan emerges from the cabin, full of joy to see Finn. Yet, for a moment, Finn feels a sense of terrible danger even though this is Rohan who would never hurt him. He's coaxed into the cabin where mounds of furs and blankets await him along with a roaring fire and a feast fit of a king.

But the fire seems to give off no warmth at first. Also, Rohan seems oddly unconcerned with certain things like the fact that Tempest is not outside and the woods have formed an impenetrable barrier. But Finn believes that it is his illness making him imagine things, but he doesn't drink the wine the Rohan offers him…

He and Rohan begin to talk about magic where Finn learns about Death Magic and Death Mages for the first time. He is surprised and happy that Rohan seems to know so much. He has never dared speak of magic with anyone else for fear that they would guess he has Fae blood. But with Rohan those concerns are not there.

Yet the conversation takes an odd and terrible turn as Rohan begins to mock Finn for having small dreams. Wanting a bit of meat and a warm fire as his fantasy

to be with Rohan, not even wishing to be at the man's estate, appear pathetic in Rohan's eyes. Finn then realizes that this is not Rohan at all. The being pretending to be his love is a Fae Death Mage called Marikoth.

Marikoth imprisons Finn as he tells Finn that he's dying and this is just a dream. The Fae Death Mage explains that he noticed Finn because Finn drained life from the Empire and he wants to know who he is and how much he knows about Death Magic. Marikoth though reveals more than he finds out from Finn, because Finn knows nothing about his heredity or his magic. Marikoth is the exiled brother of King Thalanil Ravenspar who is intent on getting revenge on his family and taking the throne for himself. He reveals that Death Mages are only born from the Ravenspar line so Finn *must* be the son of Marikoth and Thalanil's father, or Thalanil, or perhaps even Marikoth himself. Horrified, Finn denies this even as he fears it is true.

But Finn's shock is cut off as he suddenly is sent into a vision. He is in Rohan's paralyzed body as Ryleth, her assistant, Tela, her slave, Thomas, and Serxio hawk over him. They are discussing Serxio and Rohan's fate. Hex, far from being a monster that they wanted destroyed, was a creature the Fae had made a deal with. In exchange for sacrifices, Hex and her children provided the Fae a defense against other, terrible creatures in the forest. Now, with the deal broken, Hex's children will attack the village so the Fae villagers must flee to the summer palace of Aymar.

Tela wants to simply kill Rohan and Serxio for their acts, but Ryleth sees Lightbringer. She recognizes it as Vudine, the magical sword of House Aeternal, the former Fae rulers of the Empire. Though Serxio tells her that Lightbringer has been in Rohan's family for ages, she believes he must have stolen it due to him being human or, at least, *appearing* to be so. But she decides that this is beyond her pay grade and Rohan's fate should be decided by King Thalanil himself. Ryleth also believes that King Thalanil must be told how bad the overgrowth is in the Empire, because their letters begging for help have not had any effect.

Finn is transported out of the vision. Finn realizes from his vision that Rohan is in danger and he must save him. He begs Marikoth to let him go and to even allow Finn to drain a little energy from Marikoth to save himself from death. Marikoth laughs at this.

While fascinated by this vision Finn experienced, Marikoth decides he is going to kill Finn by draining him anyways. Over Marikoth's shoulder, Finn sees a raven made of old feathers, bones and energy. This bird grows until it is a monstrous shadow while Marikoth, unaware, behaves like a drug addict at the thought of draining Finn's life.

Marikoth tries to kill Finn, but his powers don't work on Finn at all. Instead, Finn drains Marikoth. With this first taste of life, Finn almost loses control to the point that he kills Marikoth. But Marikoth manages to free himself. Just before he flees the death dream, he sees the massive magical raven and acts both afraid and betrayed at its appearance here before disappearing.

The raven leads Finn out of the death dream and Finn wakes up in the Empire. The life he stole from Marikoth and from the surrounding vegetation there heals his wounds. He has to lie to Leonid about how this happens, believing that Leonid would fear or hate him if he knew Finn had Fae blood, let alone was a Death Mage. He convinces Leonid that Serxio and Rohan are in trouble and they need to go find them.

Rohan wakes up in a cart, chained with Serxio and Emma, the human woman he saved from Hex. The whole village is traveling to Aymar. Ryleth has Lightbringer on her saddle. They intend to get to the village of Tradavor that night and rest

before moving on. Rohan begs her to send someone back to get Finn who is dying. He argues with her that her deal with Hex couldn't have continued indefinitely, because she would have run out of humans to sacrifice to it, and pleads for her not to let Finn die for his actions. Ryleth refuses to help him, because the spiders are coming and her people are her only concern.

The spiders harry them all the way to Tradavor. When they get to the village, the priest of the Tradavor, Samron, refuses to let them in and traps them outside to be killed by the remaining spiders in order to save his own deal with the forest.

Rohan's connection to Lightbringer bursts into life and the sword flies to him. He finds himself repeating an ancient mantra that indicates he is the heir to House Aeturnal. He uses the magic within himself with Lightbringer as a focus to kill all of the spiders while sparing all of the Fae. The Fae, Ryleth especially, recognize that Rohan is a fated ruler of the Empire. They are welcomed into Tradavor because of this.

The magical raven, that only Finn can see, leads him and Leonid to the abandoned village where an Ostil, an enraged tree creature, has entered the space. Leonid tells Finn to run while he sacrifices himself to it so that one of them can get to Rohan and Serxio. Finn though determines to use his magic. The raven starts to speak to Finn, urging him to kill the Ostil, but Finn refuses, instead communicating with the enraged creature and convincing it to let them go. Leonid realizes that Finn is magical, but is not afraid but grateful.

Rohan awakes in Tradavor, completely exhausted by the use of his magic, and unable to even stand. He is intent however on saving Finn. He makes a deal with Ryleth that he will protect her people on the way to Aymar if she sends someone to bring Finn here and heals him. She agrees and Tela and Serxio are sent to look for Leonid and Finn.

Finn and Leonid hide when Tela and Serxio appear on the road, not realizing who they are at first. Finn uses his Death Magic to paralyze Tela while they greet Serxio. Tela realizes that Finn is a Death Mage at that moment. Assured she is not an enemy, Finn releases Tela and the four of them go back to Tradavor and Finn is reunited with Rohan.

Finn finally tells Rohan the truth about his Fae heritage and his Death Magic. Rohan completely accepts him. They realize that their magic works together. Finn drains life to feed it to Rohan. Rohan has the Aeturnal ability to imbue weapons, jewelry and buildings with enchantments, storing raw magical power within them. They see the possibility of draining the excess life from the Empire and using it to restore the life in Rirea. But that will only work if King Thalanil agrees. Rohan thinks it won't be safe to meet King Thalanil at Aymar, but, instead, to leave a letter with Ryleth to send to him after they figure out a way to get back to Rirea.

They make their way along the road to Aymar, but the forest is aggressive and blocks their path. Finn drains the excess life from the questing, invasive vines, but he takes too much inside himself and fails to feed the excess energy to Rohan. He releases the energy, carving a massive canyon in the forest. Those that didn't realize he was a Death Mage, do now. Only Ryleth is pleased by this development.

It turns out that Ryleth used to be the head of her order, but her belief that the Aeturnals and Death Mages are necessary to control the overgrowth in the Empire was considered heretical and she was stripped of her titles and sent to the tiny village as punishment. She gives Finn translated pages about a love story between the two last Aeturnal and Death Mage couples. She urges him to understand that he and Rohan are meant to be and that their abilities can save both the Empire and Rirea.

Just as they are about to enter Aymar, they discover that Emma has been murdered by Thomas. She found out that Thomas and Tela intended to out Rohan and Finn to Ryleth's old order. They killed her to stop her from telling Rohan and Finn their plan. Ryleth, Rohan, Finn, Serxio and Leonid chase Tela and Thomas into Aymar, but end up splitting up with Finn going after Tyreon.

Tyreon leads Finn to King Thalanil. Thalanil recognizes Finn as the one that drained life from his Empire and a Death Mage. He alleges that Finn is a killer. Finn claims not, but then Thalanil reveals that every Death Mage kills their mother upon entering into his power. Finn realizes then that he killed his own mother. Her wasting disease wasn't a disease at all, but was caused by him draining her.

Thalanil is about to kill Finn when he sees Finn's eyes and sees that they are the same as Maeve Ashton's, the woman he loved. This leads to the revelation that Finn is his son and that the reason Maeve ended their relationship was because she feared Thalanil would kill him because she knew he would be a Death Mage.

Instead of wanting to kill Finn, Thalanil agrees to spare Rohan, Serxio and Leonid's lives if Finn will remain with him in Aymar. The Fae king then demonstrates his great power by sending Rohan, Serxio and Leonid through a magical portal back to Rirea. He promises Rohan that if Rohan ever set foot in the Empire again, he will be killed.

And that brings us up to date!

HUNTING

The young farmer, Jeremiah, pulled his tattered cloak tighter around his scrawny shoulders. The nights were still cool even though it was on the cusp of summer, but nothing was as it should have been in the Kingdom of Rirea. Or perhaps the chill Jeremiah felt came from fear at being out so late and not the temperature at all.

But he had to stay out in the field with his flock instead of rolled up in his thin blankets by the fire. The wolves had hunted his sheep every night for the last week. Now there were only a handful of the animals left, but if they lost even one more, then he and his little sister Hannah would starve within the twelve-month, if not sooner.

Jeremiah and Hannah only had one another. Their parents had died the previous winter of a wasting disease that turned them into bloodless husks. So it fell on his fifteen-year-old shoulders to keep them fed, clothed, and with a roof over their heads. The shadowed eyes that looked out of Jeremiah's pinched and pale face looked much older than his scant years.

He stiffened as something flickered in the corner of his too-old eyes. His head shot towards the movement. But it was not what he expected to see. Instead of two gray, shaggy forms loping out of the treeline, it was two men--Willis and Connor--from a neighboring farm. They were crouched low and heading towards his precious, depleted flock. Their clothes flapped around their too thin limbs. Everyone in Rirea was hungry yet Willis and Connor's family had always gotten on with his. Surely it was the *wolves* and not the *men* who were taking his animals, wasn't it? They knew the dire situation that he and Hannah were in. They wouldn't steal from children, would they?

"Oye! What are you doing, Willis? Connor?!" Jeremiah called, rising up from his hiding spot behind a fallen down fence post.

The two men froze then turned towards him almost as if one. The older of the two, Willis, slowly straightened up to face him. His eyes looked deeper set than Jeremiah had ever seen them. Connor jerked upright too. His cheeks were so sunken that they looked like they'd been carved out by giant spoons. Want was stamped upon both their faces like a brand.

"J-Jeremiah! What are you doing out here?" Willis asked with fake bonhomie as if they were meeting in the Rose and Thorn pub and *not* in a darkened field in the middle of the night.

"Wolves," Jeremiah answered and swallowed. His right hand moved ever so slightly towards the knife he wore at his belt. "Wolves have been attacking the flock at night. Dragging them off into the woods."

He tipped his head towards the Lupine Woods whose treeline was only fifty feet away. That was what he had *thought* happened. But what if, instead of wolves

carrying off his sheep, Willis and Connor had?

"Ah! Yes, wolves are a problem." Willis rubbed the back of his neck with a dirty hand as he casually walked towards Jeremiah. "Aren't they a problem, Connor?"

Willis' younger brother blinked owlishly as if he were waking from a deep sleep. "Aye, yeah, they are, Willis. Wolves. Big wolves with their teeth and all."

Connor then let out a shrill laugh that had the hair on the back of Jeremiah's neck standing on end. Both men were now only ten feet away from him. They had moved apart from one another, coming at him from both sides. If they rushed him at the same time, he'd be overwhelmed. Was he really thinking that Willis and Connor were going to attack him? That was madness! These were people he had known his whole life! They wouldn't hurt him! Yet his right hand drifted closer to his knife again. The movement did not go unnoticed.

"He's reaching for his little knife there, Willis!" Connor scowled. "Being unfriendly!"

"Well, that isn't neighborly at all now, is it?" Willis tsked.

"Nor is stealing sheep! You know Hannah and I need them!" Jeremiah cried, revealing that he knew the truth of what the brothers were doing out here.

"Well, we need them more," Willis stated flatly. "You and your sweet Hannah are so small. You can't need as much food or water--"

"Sweet Hannah! Sweet Hannah! You said I could see her tonight, Willis!" Connor whined.

Willis shot Connor a look that told him to shut up, but Connor just whined Hannah's name again and a more maddened light came into his eyes.

"Don't you go near my sister!" Jeremiah cried and whipped out the knife.

He thrust it towards them, first at Willis and then at Connor when the younger brother took a step towards him.

"Look at that knife! A knife! A sharp knife!" Connor chanted.

"I can see that, Connor! Now shut it!" Willis hissed. Then his gaze slid back to Jeremiah. "This night can go one of two ways, Jeremiah. The nice, neighborly way where you put down the knife and we take a sheep or two or… the *not* so nice way where Hannah isn't just an orphan, but has lost a brother too..."

"Hannah and I will starve if you take any more! We have nothing else!" Jeremiah slashed the knife towards Willis as the older brother kept advancing on him.

All the while that he did this, Jeremiah could not quite believe it was happening. His neighbors were threatening to kill him. And he might have to kill *them* if they didn't stop. Sweat rolled down his face even as a chill wind blew out of the woods.

"Ah, but you don't just have the sheep. You have yourselves," Willis crooned, a cruel, predatory smile of a different sort alighting on his face.

Jeremiah blinked, confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Hannah! Sweet Hannah!" Connor was back on that again.

"You see?" Willis' grin grew. "I'm sure it isn't just my brother who would like a bit of affection. You and Hannah could offer your *company* to those who have the strength to take what they want and keep what they have--"

"You--you're disgusting! GET BACK!" Jeremiah slashed the air in front of him again.

The tip of his knife drew across the ragged fabric of Willis' tunic. The older man yelled at the shock of it though he wasn't hurt. Jeremiah swung his arm wildly again as Connor let out an angry snarl and lurched towards him intent on avenging Willis. Jeremiah's hand got caught in the fabric of Connor's shirt and he let out a scream that made him sound like a child and not a man. Connor's arms wrapped

around his chest, pinning Jeremiah's arms to his sides. The knife fell to the ground.

"I got him, Willis! I got him!" Connor cried in an almost ecstasy.

One of Willis' hands--not as beefy as it had been last summer but still strong--clamped around Jeremiah's throat. Jeremiah gasped and Willis squeezed. Black spots almost immediately began to appear before his eyes. Jeremiah tried to reach up and pry the hand away, but he couldn't get out of Connor's bear hug. The world began to tunnel just before Willis decided to release him. He coughed and wheezed as he drew in air through his injured windpipe.

"What do we do with him, Willis?" Connor's breath stank like something rotten.

A wicked smile lit Willis' ugly face. "Have you ever heard of long pig, brother?"

"Long pig? I like bacon!" Connor laughed, more of that foul breath coasting over Jeremiah's cheek.

"Well, long pig is supposed to be more *tasty* than pork. And you can do *other* things to it before you butcher it." Willis caressed Jeremiah's chin.

Jeremiah let out another cry that was high-pitched and boyish.

"And to think I believed I was the *only* predator out tonight," a rich, cultured male voice said from behind the two brothers.

All of them froze. The voice was so… unexpected. Not just because they had all thought they were the only ones out there, but because of the tone. So deep and dark and… *offering*. Offering something that Jeremiah couldn't quite name, but it made his heart thump harder in his chest and his legs tremble.

Jeremiah's gaze slid over Willis' shoulder. He wasn't sure what he expected to see. Who could the owner of that voice be? No one he knew. No one he'd ever met. He was sure of that. And he was right.

Standing just five feet away was a man dressed in silvery robes, which glittered like ice in the moonlight. Witchlight surrounded the figure and highlighted his delicate yet masculine features. His eyes were red. The color of rubies. The color of *blood*. Pointed ears poked up through the long white hair that fell in a shimmering cascade to the middle of his back. The most incongruous thing about him was that his feet were bare. They were long and elegant. He scrunched his toes in the early summer grass as if enjoying the cool dampness of the dew.

He's a Fae, Jeremiah thought, his mind fleeing to the stories his parents had told him when he was small.

"Who the hell are you?" Willis snarled.

"Pretty! He's pretty, Willis!" Connor's mouth opened wide at the end and stayed that way, showing only a few rotten teeth remaining.

An avaricious gleam entered Willis' eyes. "Indeed, he *is* pretty. A far greater prize than a sheep or long pig. But, then again, why not have all three?"

The beautiful Fae laughed. "*Sheep*? Yes, sheep. There are most definitely sheep in this field."

"Hold onto the boy, Connor. I'll deal with this," Willis said.

Willis reached down and picked up Jeremiah's dropped knife. Willis' clothes might hang off of him now, but he was still a big man with chunky limbs and a barrel-like chest. The Fae was all gossamer and butterfly wings. So easy to *crush*.

"What *are* you intending to do with that?" The Fae asked as a ray of moonlight struck the little blade.

"Come with us and you won't find out," Willis said.

"But perhaps I *want* to find out." The Fae stepped forward.

Willis blinked in confusion then thrust the blade towards the Fae's chest. "Alive or dead the bounty on Fae says, I think."

“Bounty on Fae?” The Fae repeated, as if the words tasted tart.

“Can’t you understand Common?” Willis snorted with derision.

Considering the Fae had spoken with fluidity, Willis’ words sounded like bluster. The Fae’s demeanor was so strange that even big, burly Willis appeared unnerved.

“Do you often threaten to rape and eat children?” The Fae asked, ignoring the insult.

“What--I--”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I understand *hunger*. How it can turn a person inside out. How it can warp them. Their morals are the first to go,” the Fae said casually and whatever hope Jeremiah had about being saved was reduced to ashes. “The mind sometimes next.”

The Fae tilted his head towards Connor, as if to give a prime example of this.

“Oh, Connor? Nah, he’s always been a little soft in the head!” Willis laughed, but there was a wariness in his eyes. Strangely, the knife was held almost limply in his hand. If he wasn’t careful it would fall from his fingers entirely.

The Fae advanced another step. He was within touching distance of Willis now. Willis was forced to lower the knife or risk stabbing the Fae in the stomach. Considering that had been his plan, it seemed doubly odd that he lowered the blade. The Fae’s red eyes glowed like the embers of a fire. He slowly lifted his left hand from his side and let his fingers lightly brush down the front of Willis’ ragged, stained tunic.

“Ah, you, ah, interested?” Willis’ voice rose at the end.

“In *you*?” The Fae chuckled darkly. “No more than I am in any living being.”

“Hey, that’s my brother you’re talking about!” Connor growled.

“Why don’t you let the boy go?” The Fae suggested.

“No, I won’t…” But Connor *did* release him and didn’t finish his sentence.

Jeremiah staggered a few steps back from the brothers. He knew he should run. He knew he should get back to the house and Hannah. If he had any sense, he should put the rickety chair against the door and huddle with Hannah by the fire until the sun came up. But he found himself unable to move or even drag his gaze away from the Fae.

The Fae was smiling at Jeremiah. It was a smile that had heat blooming between the young farmer’s thighs. He had never been looked at with such… *desire*. Had he not been disgusted when Willis had suggested he sell himself for food and comfort? But the Fae was so beautiful except… maybe too pale? Maybe too wan?

“Are you--are you all right?” Jeremiah asked the Fae, totally forgetting about the brothers.

“No, no, I am… weak. Famished, really,” the Fae said with a soft laugh that caressed Jeremiah’s skin.

“Aren’t we all?” Willis muttered and stared at the Fae, too, with an ill-concealed hunger.

“Oh, I--I might have some bread left from my supper,” Jeremiah offered.

What was he doing? He should be running! Not offering food to the Fae! It was madness! Yet he continued on with an almost desperate determination to please this beautiful being. Even so, it was a hard thing to give up even a scrap of bread. Every morsel was precious these days. But his parents had taught him and his sister to be polite and generous with strangers. So the young farmer dug into the dirty sack tied at his waist.

“I would not deprive you of any part of your meal. It seems to me that you are almost as hungry as I am,” the Fae said. “But how generous you are! To offer me

sustenance before we are even introduced."

"You--you saved me," Jeremiah found himself saying. "I owe you everything."

And the Fae had saved him. For the moment. If he took advantage of it. If he left right now. After all, Willis had his knife and was so much bulkier than the slender Fae. Connor was… well, *mad*. He would attack the Fae even without a weapon and between the two of them the Fae would be driven to the ground and… Jeremiah didn't want to think of the rest. He didn't want to imagine blood spraying from a cut throat. He felt so *odd*. So odd. He should be running.

But instead, he said, "I'm Jeremiah. And that's Willis and Connor."

Those red eyes were mesmerizing! He found himself getting lost in them every time he looked into them. What was he supposed to do? What was so important that he needed to remember? If it wasn't about this beautiful being, he couldn't imagine it mattered at all!

"And I am Marikoth," the Fae said. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Jeremiah. Is that your home over there?"

Marikoth tipped his head towards the single-room farmhouse where Jeremiah's little sister slept. He found himself nodding.

"Do you live there alone?" Marikoth asked almost sweetly.

Jeremiah shook his head even as some part of him screamed not to tell Marikoth about Hannah. But why shouldn't he? Marikoth wouldn't hurt her. No, Willis and Connor… they had wanted to hurt her and him and… "No, my sister Hannah is there."

"And your parents? You seem young to be on your own," Marikoth asked, almost sharply, which had Jeremiah frowning, feeling he was forgetting something.

"They… died," Jeremiah answered simply.

Marikoth nodded. "Ah, I see. How tragic! But death is an integral part of life. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

"But they're… gone," Jeremiah struggled to express himself. His mind felt almost *muddy*. Like his thoughts were mired in sticky molasses.

"No one is really gone. If you had the ability to see, you would find this field filled with the dead. You might even see the shades of your parents frantically waving to you, trying to get your attention." A secret smile played on Marikoth's lips.

"Can you--you see them?" Jeremiah asked hopefully.

Marikoth nodded. "Yes, and soon you will see them again, too. You and Hannah."

The Fae put a hand on his cheek, still keeping the other on Willis' chest. Willis and Connor stood there like soldiers. Not speaking. Not reacting to anything that was said. Just staring ahead like empty husks.

The Fae's fingers were icy cold, and yet, there was pleasure in the touch. Jeremiah had never been caressed by such a beautiful person before. It felt like a benediction even as the chill from those fingers and palm were spreading slowly, but inexorably, across his face and down his neck.

"You remind me a little bit of a young man I met recently," Marikoth said as color highlighted his sharp cheekbones. "Finn is his name. Do you know a Finn who lives nearby?"

Jeremiah tried to speak, but his entire face was numb! And he didn't seem to have the energy to push through this chill. So he shook his head. That practically exhausted him. Marikoth seemed disappointed and he ached even more at making this celestial being unhappy.

But then Marikoth brightened. “That’s all right. I’m sure I’ll find him again. I’m very good at *hunting*.”

Marikoth should have said “hunting people down,” but he just said “hunting” and, again, that feeling that something was very *wrong* about all of this occurred to Jeremiah.

“Is that… is that why… why you were in the woods at night?” Jeremiah asked. The words felt like boulders that he was pushing uphill with his tongue. “Looking for… for Finn?”

“Yes, but then I got hungry and cold and I saw the three of you,” Marikoth told him with that brilliant smile. “Why don’t we go inside your home? We can all get acquainted and… and have a bite to eat.”

Jeremiah thought of what Marikoth had said about his parents waving frantically at him. Were they trying to get his attention? Were they attempting to warn him of something? About someone?

But these thoughts were drowned in that sticky sweetness that had entered his mind and all he could do--all he *wanted* to do--was nod and smile at Marikoth. His sister, after all, would love the beautiful man with the ruby red eyes and the bewitching smile.

LESSONS

Finn Ashton--or now as he was known, Prince Finrael Ravenspar--watched his tutor, the most honorable Lord Gaelyn Camrys' head nod as the warmth of the day caused him to doze. Or maybe it was the *simplicity* of the lesson that couldn't hold the lord's interest.

According to his father--not to mention Lord Camrys *himself*--the lord was a Fae scholar of renown. He had come to today's lesson with exquisitely bound books that contained enlightened treatises on Fae dialects, the finer points of grammar and very definite ideas about diction. He had started their lesson in one of Aymar's gracious gardens with alertness and precision. It was only when he realized that Finn was a true beginner and needed books that began with something like "A is for apple" in the simplest Fae dialect that he had slumped in despair. He had clearly thought that teaching a prince would be more refined. He had been sorely disappointed. The heat of the day had drained the rest of the enthusiasm from Lord Camrys and sleep had beckoned.

Not that Finn minded. He was rather done with the lesson himself. His limbs yearned to move. He was tempted to simply run around the garden to burn off some of his energy. At Tanglewood, chores would have had Finn on the go constantly until he crawled into his little alcove at night and fell into dreamless sleep. But that was not his life now. No one would let him do anything for himself.

He had understood the need for someone else to take his measurements for new clothes, but to help him put them on? He was *not* Miles who refused to bend down to tie his own laces! He guessed that Miles would have loved the bath attendants who had tried to bathe Finn the night before, too. Finn had *not*.

It had been hard enough to be naked with Rohan--and he had *wanted* to do that--but to have others see his body and judge him and… no, he had not needed nor desired the servants' help in bathing. Even without speaking their language he had been able to communicate that he wished to clean himself. They had looked troubled as if he were requesting something unnatural. Or maybe they had simply worried his father would be angry with them for not attending him whether he wanted it or not. He wasn't sure himself. His father--King Thalanil Ravenspar--was a mystery to him.

On the one hand, his mother had loved Thalanil and that spoke in his favor. But, then again, she had married his stepfather so maybe that did not count as much as it otherwise would have. And on the other hand, Marikoth was Thalanil's brother.

Not that he and Thalanil had spoken about that.

Or about Death Magic.

Or about Rohan.

All these things were verboten. It seemed that they spent more time silently regarding one another than speaking. And other than finding his father incredibly

beautiful, graceful, powerful and intense, Finn knew little else about him.

He wondered if his father saw taking care of him as something of a duty more than a joy. Finn feared that was the case. After all, it was only because of his mother's memory that Thalanil had not struck Finn down in the first place.

Because I'm a Death Mage, Finn thought with a burst of anxiety.

He reached up and touched the white wing of hair nestled in his dark-brown locks. His hair had turned white after the incident in the forest with the vines. Marikoth's hair was pure white. If Finn kept using his Death Magic, would his hair turn all white too? Would he go crazy and evil like Marikoth as well?

But Marikoth doesn't have someone like Rohan to help him focus and store the energy and then use it for good! Finn reminded himself. *But then again… I don't have Rohan anymore, either. Father is intent that we never see one another again, that I never return to Rirea, and that the Wall remains up forever.*

Finn clenched his hands into fists, feeling an almost physical pain at his separation from the Rirean king. He must not allow despair to overwhelm him. He would figure out a way to change his father's mind. While it might have been physically possible for him to escape back to Rirea--convincing Tyreon, the King of the Wolves, to let him through the Wall--that was not really an option. He had given his word to his father that he would stay in exchange for Rohan's life. All he would be doing if he ran away would be putting Rohan in danger again, and not just Rohan. He could easily see his father laying waste to the entirety of Rirea at his betrayal. He didn't think that reaction would be because Thalanil loved him so well, but because his father hated Rohan's family so deeply.

Why? Why does he hate the De Clares? Is it because of something Rohan's parents did? Or the fact that they are the descendants of the former Fae rulers of the Eclipse Throne? Finn wondered.

He had no answers to any of these questions, yet. Talking to Thalanil was difficult and complicated at best. He often felt tongue-tied with the Fae king. And worse, he feared if he said the wrong thing that Thalanil would shut him out entirely and he would not get a second chance to bring Rohan up again.

I will find a way to get back to Rohan and help Rirea, Finn repeated what had almost become a mantra for him. But it was not going to occur in this moment with a sleeping scholar beside him.

Finn's eyes roved over the garden with its myriad of many-colored blooms, the tinkling water features, the comfortable-looking trunks of trees just begging for him to go lounge under them with a book.

A book written in Common, not Fae. Do they even have those here?

Maybe if he went back into the palace he could find a blanket to spread out and--no, he was sure to see his father if he did that. Thalanil would, undoubtedly, ask what Finn was doing. Why wasn't he at his lessons? And Finn would have no good answers.

Despite his father being incredibly busy with matters of state--or so he had said to Finn before introducing his tutor--it seemed whenever Finn did anything unexpected or unplanned, his father appeared! It had only been a few days since they met, but it was uncanny how his father anticipated the "trouble" that Finn might get into, like trying to help the servants clean his dishes or wanting to plant some of the flowers for the gardeners or even baking some bread! But no, Finn was *not* to do such things! He was the prince! He was to *serve* in other ways, but he needed to learn to speak and read Fae in order to do that! And here he was thinking of sneaking away from his books.

Rohan knows how to speak Fae. He would have been able to teach me, I'm sure! Finn thought unkindly as he cast a glance at the sleeping Lord Camrys.

Then he felt ashamed. It wasn't Lord Camrys' fault that he was an indifferent student or that the Fae lord could not hold his attention like the Rirean king did. He should try to learn. He needed to put his mind towards it. Besides, if his father ever allowed him to learn magic, the spellbooks would undoubtedly be in one of the Fae dialects.

So I should study even if Lord Camrys is sleeping...

But his determination to study fell away as he caught sight of a fluffy tail, waving like a flag, that could be seen just above the tops of the rose bushes. Finn glanced over at Lord Camrys. His chin was now resting on his chest and a soft whistle emitted from his nose.

I will study… in a little bit.

Finn carefully closed his book and placed it on the garden table, then, light as a bird, he got up from his chair and raced over to Tyreon, the King of Wolves and fluffiest of companions. The wolf welcomed his embrace. Finn buried his face in Tyreon's fur and petted him fiercely. The tail was a blur.

"Hello, Tyreon. I'm so glad you're here," Finn whispered. "I thought I was going to go mad from sitting still for so long."

Tyreon made a low *woof* and pulled out of his arms.

"Hey! Where are you going? Don't you want pets?" Finn asked amusedly.

Seeing that he now had Finn's full attention, Tyreon *woofed* again.

"Shhhh, Tyreon, we don't want to wake Lord Camrys," Finn whispered, looking over his shoulder towards the sleeping scholar.

But this instruction just had Tyreon dancing away from Finn's arms and looking at him expectantly. He recognized this look, the loll of the tongue and the tilt of the head.

"You want me to follow you?"

The wolf danced a few more feet away. Finn cast one more look over his shoulder at Lord Camrys before turning back to the wolf.

"Okay, I think it's safe, but be very quiet."

The wolf practically levitated in the air in excitement and took off towards a deeper part of the garden. Finn grinned as he raced after the graceful animal. It felt so good to *move*. The boots he wore fit him perfectly. His clothes were very lovely and made of silk and velvet and cotton, moved with him easily. He'd never had such fine clothes like these, and there would soon be a room full or more if his father had his way.

He spoils me already, Finn thought. *Even as he keeps his distance.*

At their dinner the night before, Thalanil had watched him eat with eagle eyes, indicating that his plate should be refilled the moment there was an inch of space. There had been luscious roast meats and delicately sauteed vegetables, fresh baked bread and sweet butter, along with sparkling wines and cool juices. Finn had eaten more than he'd ever done in his whole life. Every bite was more delicious than the last. He'd even indulged in the wine, loving how it fizzed against his tongue.

Eating and drinking had made the long silences between them somewhat bearable. Finn had attempted to start conversations, but his father had said little, just studying him for the most part. The most he had said was when he had told Finn that he would be studying under Lord Camrys the next day.

It has not even been a week since we found one another. Maybe it is to be expected that we are awkward in each other's company, Finn thought.

But Finn feared it was because his father didn't want a Death Mage as a son. Or maybe it was simply because Finn was half human and looked it. No red eyes or pointed ears for him. His father had loved his mother, but sometimes he wondered if he had *in spite* of her being human and not at all because of it.

Tyreon led him to a secluded grove within the garden. It was a shady area where sunlight only dappled the dark, green, cool grass. There was a slender opening between bushes that Tyreon squeezed through and Finn slipped in after the big wolf. He heard what Tyreon wanted to show him before he saw them.

There were six pups. Three of them as white as snow like Tyreon, and three of them as black as coal like their mother who was lying in the shade. The pups immediately raced over to their father, their ears and tails flapping. A few fell over their too large paws in their anticipation of getting to the King of Wolves.

"Is this your family, Tyreon?" Finn asked as he got down on his haunches just as an inquisitive pup tumbled over to him. "Are you Tyreon's babies?"

Finn reached down and stroked the soft fur and rubbed the exposed tummies. The pups whined and let out excited howls. Finn couldn't help but lean down and kiss heads and scratch between ears and under chins. Soon he had all the pups circling around him, yipping happily as they tried to get his attention. Finn laid down on his back and the pups immediately surged over him, planting themselves on his chest, arms and legs. He tickled many paws and kissed many ears. He was rolling around with them while Tyreon and his mate watched on, tongues lolling out of their mouths happily as they entrusted him with their children.

That was when his father appeared in the opening to the grove.

Everyone froze. Even the pups.

His father stared at him and then his eyes slowly moved over the pups to the lounging wolf parents then back to Finn.

"Father!" Finn rocketed up, sending pups tumbling everywhere. There were yips and whines of distress as the pups tried to climb "Finn Mountain" again.

"Finrael," his father said smoothly as he parted the branches of the bushes and stepped fully into the cool glade. A rare smile crossed his lips as he said, "Working hard, I see."

Once more, his father had known when Finn was up to no good.

SEARCHING FOR GLASS

King Rohan De Clare threaded his way through the dense trees in the Lupine Woods. He was careful not to let his horse--her name was Thunder, as his beloved Tempest had been left behind in the Empire--brush against the poison-weeping bark or lose her footing on the treacherous rise. But going slow was necessary in any case as he also needed to study each and every tree, looking for one with leaves of glass. One would have thought it would be easy to find such a tree. One would be *wrong*.

Most Fae magic stemmed from nature. His uncle believed that the Wall dividing his Kingdom of Rirea and the Fae Empire of the Eclipse Throne stemmed from a single, special tree whose leaves were not made of cellulose, but of magical glass. The Wall had grown from that single tree, having been fed energy from power stones. If the tree was cut down, the Wall would fall and there would not be enough energy to recreate it. Rohan was using his magical sword, Lightbringer, to cut off a leaf from each tree he passed to check if it were one of the normal twisted trees or the tree that the whole of the Wall had sprung from.

"Remember that it will be spelled to look like any other tree," his Uncle Hugues De Clare's scholarly voice rose up behind him. "We must sever a leaf from its branch for the spell to cease and reveal the tree's true nature."

Rohan's arm jerked at the sound of that once beloved voice and Lightbringer sliced through a whole branch, bringing it crashing down nearly upon him. But Guard Captain Leonid Blanchet cleverly stuck out his shield to block it. The limb bounced harmlessly off the small, round shield and fell to the ground. The leaves remained normal leaves. It was not the tree with leaves of glass.

"Another one down, just a few million more to go," Leonid said with a grin as he shook off the sap from his shield.

"We *will* find it even if I have to chop down every damned tree in this forest," Rohan stated flatly, unable to smile about this task.

The Wall separated him from Finn. Though Finn had willingly agreed to stay with his father, the Fae King Thalanil Ravenspar, he had only done so to save Rohan from certain death. Rohan was still a little rattled by just how powerful Thalanil was, but it would not deter him from getting back to Finn. If he could take down the Wall, Thalanil could not hide behind it and would have to deal with him, king to king. Or father to lover, too. Or what he really wanted was father-in-law to husband. But with the Wall keeping him and Finn completely apart, that could never be. He had to find the tree and chop it down.

"Yes, my king. We will. We'll get Finn back. I'm sorry I made light of the search," Leonid quickly amended, looking shamefaced.

Rohan though shook his head. "No, it is I who should be sorry. I know that you are as serious about this search as I am. It is just…"

“Nearly three weeks of searching and it feels like we’re no closer,” Leonid filled in the rest.

Rohan nodded wearily and raked his free hand through his hair. Thunder danced underneath him. Unlike Tempest, this horse did not quite trust him fully, especially in the Lupine Woods. While Tempest would have gone through the plains of oblivion for him, Thunder was not as convinced he was a good bet.

“Good gods! What are you doing, you stupid horse? I said this way, not that way!” Lord Serxio Lemos cried out.

Rohan looked up to see the foppish lord vainly attempting to turn his horse back up the rise, but the mare seemed intent on coming towards them. Serxio pulled his crimson cloak tighter around him as his horse also seemed intent on rubbing against the trees, likely in the hopes of brushing her rider off. Rohan suppressed a grin.

“And you got my cloak dirty! Not to mention my boots!” Serxio moaned at the irate animal. He was always beautifully, if inappropriately, dressed and today was no different. He had on red and yellow silks. He practically glowed against the drab trees and overcast sky. Those beautiful clothes were, as he was yelling at his horse about, dirty. “And oh--my king, Leonid! There you both are!”

Serxio lifted his head too quickly as he caught sight of them and his plumed hat nearly sailed off of his head, but he clamped a hand down on it at the last moment. Leonid snorted. His Guard Captain and the lord were friends, but teased each other mercilessly. Serxio gave Leonid a narrow-eyed look, having heard the snort.

“I take it that you two didn’t have any luck either?” Serxio asked as his horse stopped of her own accord by Rohan and Leonid’s. “No glass leaves?”

“None,” Rohan said, the word tasting bitter in his mouth.

Serxio cast a side-eyed glance at Rohan’s uncle who was over twenty feet away investigating other trees with several of the Guard.

“We *are* sure that there really is a tree with leaves of glass?” Serxio asked softly. “This isn’t some kind of wild goose chase, is it?”

“It is a theory,” Rohan answered as he, too, watched his uncle test tree after tree. “But it is all we have to go on.”

“Ah, quite, yes, and there are many more trees yet to test so…” Serxio let out a breath that sent the yellow plume attached to his hat gusting upwards.

“You’re lucky we’re hunting trees and nothing bloody sentient,” Leonid groused. “That outfit of yours is so garish that it’s like a warning sign that screams to stay away, Serxio. Why can’t you dress properly? In leathers or whatnot?”

Serxio eyed both Leonid and Rohan’s stained and darkened leather armor with a moue of distaste on his lips.

“Your outfits depress me,” Serxio said. “I dress to make myself happy and beautiful, like a proud peacock. The two of you look… well, I think there’s enough mud ground into that armor, Leonid, that you could sprout flowers. Not to mention under your *nails*.”

His Guard captain was now the one to give Serxio a narrow-eyed look. “Checking trees is dirty business. How many have you checked? Your hands look much too clean.”

“Gentlemen,” Rohan chided softly.

Their bickering usually amused him, but their voices seemed to echo today. It was eerie how silent the woods were. No birds chirping. No insects buzzing. No howls from the wood’s namesake. There was simply nothing alive but them here, or so it seemed.

“It’s so quiet. Is it always this quiet?” Serxio asked.

“No, it’s not,” Leonid answered. “It reminds me of that silence when a super-predator has arrived. All the animals go quiet as the dead.”

Rohan wondered what the wolves of the Lupine Woods would be afraid of that would keep them quiet. He sincerely hoped that Leonid was wrong in his supposition that something else was stalking the woods now.

“There have been tales of farmers--whole families--going missing. I thought it was the wolves, but I haven’t seen one recently,” Leonid stated and spat on the ground.

Rohan had a momentary stab of guilt. Usually, he hunted wolves every day to keep the people safe, but his search for the tree with leaves of glass had distracted him from that task. Yet Leonid was right. They had not caught sight of any furry bodies slipping through the trees. What had happened to all the wolves?

“How are things with your uncle, Rohan?” Serxio asked after silence had fallen for a time.

“How do you think they are?” Leonid asked and his lips flattened as he glanced back at the older De Clare.

“They are as they have been since we found him on my throne,” Rohan answered dryly, but his heart felt sick.

After King Thalanil had sent Rohan, Serxio and Leonid flying out of the Fae Empire and back into Rirea through a magical portal, the three of them had made their way back to Reave Castle. While it had only been a little over a week that they had spent in the Empire, nearly a month had passed in Rirea. But, even so, Rohan had expected that the Guards would be scouring the woods for them. Yet there were no Guards searching high and low for their king, Guard captain or noble lord. There was no one looking for them at all.

In that bare month his uncle had proclaimed Rohan dead and had already assumed the throne. Perhaps if not for the situation with Tyreon and the revelations about his uncle being involved in a love triangle with the Fae king--*and Finn’s mother, by the gods*--Rohan would not have jumped to the conclusion he did. Maybe if he hadn’t found out his uncle had also *failed* to mention their connection to House Aeturnal and so many other things, then a seed of doubt would have not taken root in Rohan’s heart. But that seed had been planted and his uncle’s quick actions to usurp the throne had caused it to sprout into the full blown belief that his uncle was eager to see him *gone*.

Rohan had pushed open the doors to the throne room and strode inside with Leonid and Serxio flanking him. His uncle had been dressed in royal red and gold robes. He sat upon Rohan’s throne, wearing Rohan’s crown, with Rohan’s jeweled scepter in his right hand. Fury had lit in Rohan’s chest at the sight. He had drawn Lightbringer. The blade’s runes had blazed with righteous fury.

Courtiers in all their finery had lined the red carpet that led up to the throne. Rohan strode past them with that unsheathed sword and they had cringed from him in terror. He felt like he had when he had destroyed Hex. He was the heir to House Aeturnal and he was the one and true king of Rirea.

“Rohan! Oh, by the gods!” Uncle Hugues had exclaimed upon seeing him. Hugues’ eyes went so wide they looked ready to pop out of his head. His face went pale as milk. Sweat appeared on his upper lip. “You’re--you’re alive! We thought--oh, we thought--”

“You thought to make yourself king in my absence!” Rohan snarled. “Get off my throne!”

His uncle had not risen from the throne upon seeing him and only seemed to realize this when Rohan had made it to the base of the dais and demanded his

removal. Only then had he got to his feet on slightly shaking limbs. Some might have said that his uncle was moving slowly because he was in shock at the return of his nephew from the dead. But others--including Rohan--attributed it to a *reluctance* to leave the seat of power. Lightbringer was emitting a low hum as if eager to cleave through limbs and stab through hearts.

"No, I… we thought you were dead! My boy, you've been gone for a month! No sign of you!" his uncle protested as Rohan mounted the steps.

Hugues tried to back away as Rohan marched up the stairs, but the backs of his thighs hit the throne. He sidled over to the side of the throne, nearly tripping on the kingly vestments he had stolen.

"How *hard* did you look for those signs of me?" Rohan's voice was low and arctic.

Hugues' mouth opened and shut at first without any sounds coming out before he stammered, "W-what? We looked everywhere! Rohan--"

"And how *long* did you look?" Rohan interrupted, looming over the other man. "A day? A few days? Perhaps you gave it a week?"

"We were continuing to look even now! We--"

"You've left me for dead in those woods *twice* now, Uncle Hugues!" Rohan stabbed a finger into his uncle's finery-covered chest. "You did not wait *one* month before taking my crown."

"I explained about the other time! I--I swear, Rohan, I only took the throne now because things are so dire!" His uncle protested. "We were not giving up on you! And I swore that I would give the crown back to you if you returned! Tell him! Everyone, tell him!"

No one said a word. Whether his uncle had really made that promise or not was irrelevant. It only mattered if he intended to *keep* it.

"I have returned," Rohan stated flatly.

They stared at one another. Rohan tried to remind himself that this man could have taken the throne from him when he was a child. Why would his uncle betray him now? Perhaps the answer was simple. Perhaps his uncle thought that he could do a better job than Rohan was. Thinking of how summarily Thalanil had dismissed him--how easily the Fae king had sent him flying--maybe his uncle was *right*. But no, he was king. He was also the heir to House Aeturnal. He and Finn… they were meant to be together. He was certain of it. The way their magic worked in tandem showed that they were fated. And he would have a home for Finn *here* in *his* kingdom.

His uncle reached up and removed the gold crown from his head and extended it and the scepter to Rohan. Rohan took them both, almost jerking them from his uncle's hands. Hugues had then sunk to his knees.

"My king, forgive me for having offended you in any way," his uncle had begged. "You are the one true king and I am your loyal servant. I swear it."

All the courtiers had gotten down on their knees too. They murmured in unison, "My king."

His gaze swept to his two dear friends, Leonid and Serxio, and then finally back to his uncle. Rohan placed the crown atop his own head and then he had sat on the throne. He was muddy, filthy, wearing Fae clothes, with Lightbringer in one hand and the scepter in the other. He sat in that throne and felt it was more *his* than it ever had before. But his heart was heavier than it had ever been and he had never felt more alone. Yet then he thought of Finn and a feeling of rightness swept through him.

"We need to find the tree with leaves of glass, Uncle Hugues, and we need to find it *now,*" Rohan commanded.

Since that day, Rohan, Serxio, Leonid, Uncle Hugues and a number of the Guard had searched the Lupine Woods all along the Wall where his uncle believed the tree might likely be. The chill between himself and his uncle though had not thawed. Hugues had tried again and again to speak with him, but Rohan had rebuffed him.

That had been harder to do than he had thought. For Rohan wanted to ask his uncle about House Aeturnal. He wanted to ask about Lightbringer. He wanted to tell his uncle what he had learned in the Empire. But trust was simply not there. So Rohan searched his parents' library and the musty documents of their heritage on his own, even as he guessed that the books likely to be on point would likely be in his uncle's rooms.

"I don't trust him," Leonid muttered darkly and spat.

His Guard captain was staring with intense dislike at Hugues. He had revealed to Rohan that he had never trusted Hugues, feeling that the older man had tried to play shadow-king rather than advisor to Rohan. In truth, Rohan knew he had let that happen. He hated most of his kingly duties and had longed to hunt wolves and keep the people safe, not listen to harvest reports. But both were part of his duty and he should not have shirked the one for the other.

"Do you really think he's a traitor or just a fool?" Serxio asked.

Leonid gave the foppish lord a crooked smile. "Finally, you make some sense."

"I always make sense!" Serxio glared at him.

"He's not a fool," Rohan said softly.

"So that leaves traitor then," Leonid grimaced.

Rohan said nothing. He truly didn't know.

"Ah, I heard that you are keeping Hugues' decision to hold a summit with Bolan, Sultane and… ah, well, the Achuviel Kingdom," Serxio said hesitantly.

"Yes, I am. Except, I'm not sure that the enemy is King Thalanil, but his brother, Marikoth," Rohan said and his lips flattened as he remembered all that Finn had told him about the other Death Mage.

"Is it really a coincidence that our land is dying and there's a Death Mage on our side of the Wall?" Leonid pointed out carefully.

"I think not," Rohan agreed.

"But we're trying to take the Wall down… shouldn't we be asking for King Thalanil to *move* it a little? For example, to Rirea's boundaries? Then we'd be safe from Marikoth," Serxio asked as he flapped one arm in the general direction of said boundaries.

"If we could actually speak to Thalanil, I would suggest that very thing," Rohan stated.

"Oh! Oh! Could we try to get word to him about the summit? Maybe he would send Finn!" Serxio looked so hopeful that Rohan didn't want to pop his bubble.

Leonid, though, was in a bubble-popping mood. "How do we get an invitation to King Thalanil exactly? Slide it under the Wall? Throw it over? It's infinite, remember?"

Serxio scowled at him. "There's the old road that used to connect the Aymar Palace with Reave Castle."

"The Wall cuts right across it!" Leonid retorted.

"Yes, I am *aware*. But there are often sightings of Fae there," Serxio replied acidly. "We could affix the invitation to the Wall so that they could read it. Maybe they would send for Tyreon to take down the Wall to get it. Especially if we made it

very official, you know! With pomp and circumstance. An official, royal communication!"

"That's--"

"Not a bad idea," Rohan admitted.

"My king," Leonid said with a grimace, "the Wall is practically opaque. How are they going to read it?"

"We could make it in really big letters! But that's also why we make it a big deal when we post it there with a Guard of Honor and all," Serxio jumped in. "Maybe word of what we're doing will get to Finn at least!"

Leonid frowned, but said, "I don't suppose it could hurt."

"It couldn't! And it might lead to some real communications between the Empire and Rirea," Serxio proclaimed with triumph.

"It's very good thinking, Serxio. I put you in charge of it. In fact, I want you to be part of that honor guard who waits for the Fae to respond," Rohan said.

Serxio's expression fell. "Me? Stand outside? In the woods until the Fae… uhm, I was more thinking that--"

"You will be *perfect* for making a splash and getting the Fae's attention, Serxio." Rohan clapped his shoulder. "No one is better than you at making an entrance."

"Oh, well, that's true." Serxio nodded.

"And you *glow* so the Fae will definitely see you," Leonid grinned.

That got him a sniff from Serxio, which had Rohan hiding a grin.

"But I was so hoping that *if* you were going to have the summit with all those nobles that there would be a formal ball. Perhaps a masked ball!" Serxio enthused. His whole face lit up with joy. "Ah, the finery! The intrigue! The romance! The--"

"This is a working summit, Serxio. About serious matters," Rohan reminded him.

He couldn't bear the thought of a ball where he would have to dance with people or look like a wallflower or antagonistic or worse.

It would have been one thing if Finn was here. Then I would have a ball every night of the summit just so I could dance with him, Rohan thought wistfully. His jaw clenched as he imagined having to instead dance with King Tearlach instead. He shuddered. There would absolutely be *no* ball.

"Yes, I suppose so." Serxio appeared crestfallen.

"Another time, Serxio." Rohan clapped his back again.

"What if I get King Thalanil to come to the summit? Or better yet… *Finn*! Will you have a ball then?" Serxio asked.

"Yes, of course, but I don't want you to get your hopes up," Rohan began as he was very firmly not getting his *own* hopes up.

"I'll make it happen!" Serxio practically quivered in his saddle. He reminded Rohan of a very eager ratter about to go down the hole to chase out the rodents. "I must have a ball!"

Leonid lifted his eyebrows. "Now look what you've done, my king. You've gotten him all excited."

"You'll like a ball, too, Leonid! Oh, but you'd have to wear something else other than your tatty armor." Serxio sniffed again.

"I'll be working that ball, you idiot! Not a guest!" Leonid shook his head.

"If we do have a ball, I would love for you to be my guest, Leonid," Rohan said cordially.

"Thank you, my king, but with all those strangers in the castle, I would rather be watching your back officially," Leonid said.

"As you like then," Rohan said, sure, despite his desires for it to be otherwise, that there would be no ball, because there would be no Finn.

"If Serxio's mad plan to talk to King Thalanil works, another thing you might suggest to him is helping him with his *life* problem," Leonid suggested. "Finn drains the extra life from Thalanil's lands and you send it to Rirea to restore our dead ones. Balance."

"Yes, balance." Rohan frowned. "It does seem a perfect solution as if the land itself is recognizing that the Wall should not be dividing our two kingdoms."

"Not to mention that you and Finn are magically compatible!" Serxio brought up his earlier thought. "It is fate! You two are fated! He can't stand in the way."

"You mean Thalanil?" Rohan asked.

Serxio was looking up at the Wall in the distance. The foppish young lord blinked and focused on him. "Exactly. At least we know that Finn is safe for now. He's with his father who might not like us, but… but I think he likes Finn. Who couldn't like Finn?"

"He's a Death Mage, Serxio," Leonid said grimly. "They don't take kindly to those there."

"Yes, I realize that, but Finn is so sweet! No one could be afraid of him! He's not… not the sort to hurt anyone unless he had no choice," Serxio protested.

"I think you both have good points," Rohan said. "But even if Finn is being treated well by Thalanil, if he uses his magic but can't release it safely…"

They all remembered the furrow that was carved through the forest when that had happened before. Finn had created a *canyon*.

"He needs you to deal with it properly," Leonid filled in.

And I need him.

Lightning raced across the sky above them and thunder rumbled not too far behind it. It was going to rain, and rain in the Lupine Woods was deadly. Just before Rohan called for them all to return to the castle, he couldn't help but think of that one rainy day in the woods when he and Finn had met. What had seemed like a chance encounter had become so much more. His heart ached. His arms felt empty. He needed Finn against him. He needed Finn safe and with him. He would find a way back to Finn.

No matter what it takes.

REASONS WHY

Finn colored and clutched pups to his chest. They yipped as he was squishing them too hard. “I’m sorry, Father! I’ll get right back to my lessons! Lord Camrys… uhm, well--”

“Fell asleep and you decided to take advantage of that by playing with the pups? Is that about right?” His father finished for him.

Finn just nodded as the pups playfully nipped his fingers before sliding down his chest. His father’s laughter had his head jerking up. Thalanil was smiling and his face was totally transformed. His father was beautiful, more beautiful than even most Fae who made beauty common, but when Thalanil smiled and laughed he was like a celestial being. Finn found himself grinning too.

“I’m a little *below* his usual level of student, I think,” Finn admitted with a slightly pained shrug.

“He will teach you and he will be respectful,” his father said crisply.

Finn’s head jerked up. “I didn’t mean to suggest that Lord Camrys wasn’t! He’s very kind! I just--”

“Finrael, I know you well enough that even if he was rude to you that you would say nothing against him,” his father interrupted gently. “I was perhaps too quick to try and fill your days with studying when you are not used to it, I think. Besides, who can resist Tyreon and Skye’s children?”

“That’s her name? Skye?” Finn craned his head to see the black wolf who wagged her tail at him.

“Yes, she and Tyreon mated for life some time ago. This is their fifth litter,” his father answered as he surprisingly laid on the ground beside Finn.

The pups immediately surged over his father’s beautiful purple and white robes. His father didn’t brush them off but instead played with them just as eagerly as Finn had. He didn’t even stop the black ball of fluff that gnawed on his sleeve. His father just scratched behind the pup’s ears.

“I hope I didn’t disappoint you by leaving my lessons,” Finn said quietly. “I will learn the languages and diction and everything. I--”

“I am certain you will, Finrael. Your lessons are not on any time table. Time… is different here,” his father reminded him.

That made Finn think of how much faster things were going in Rirea. It had been less than a week here, but it likely had been *several* weeks in Rirea. Finn’s heart beat dully in his chest and a bitter taste filled his mouth.

“What exactly is the time difference compared to Rirea?” Finn asked.

His father’s forehead furrowed, but then cleared as a pup licked his cheek. “Ah, you are wondering if you will age!”

“No, I--”

"You won't," his father answered the question he had not been asking. "You are not just *half* Fae. Between your mother's Fae bloodline and my own, you are likely three-quarters. And my magic tells me…" His father's red eyes narrowed as he fluttered the fingers of his left hand at Finn. Golden light flowed around them. "Yes, your age is slowing. You won't grow much older before you *set*. Likely around the human twenty-fifth year."

"Oh." Finn blinked. Immortality. He hadn't even considered that. It was yet one more thing to adjust to. "I--I didn't know that."

"Now you need not worry that we will be parted," his father said with an affectionate smile.

Finn realized then that this was his father's concern. But his concern was about how much time was passing in Rirea and, now in addition to that, if Rohan had enough Fae blood to be immortal too.

"I'm glad about that, of course. But I was wondering about the time difference between Rirea and here. If a week passed here--"

"What does it matter? We have nothing to do with the mortal lands beyond the Wall," his father said, smiling a little rigidly at a pup.

Finn knew that he risked shutting down this opening between his father and himself by continuing to talk about Rirea, let alone Rohan, but it was important. Rohan was the most important person to him. He drew in a steadying breath.

"Rohan--"

"Finrael, we have discussed him--"

"No, you sent him flying from this realm without any explanation," Finn contradicted. "And any time I try to speak to you about him, you change the topic or won't speak at all. Why? Why do you hate him so much?"

He saw his father's jaw clench and release. "What you say is… fair. I have done that."

Finn swallowed. "He's a good man. He's--"

"The heir of House Aeturnal?" Those red eyes slid to him then away. "Our enemy?"

"He's not our enemy!"

"He's been raised by greedy, grasping mortals. He will make a claim on my throne and then I will have to--"

"He won't! He doesn't want your throne! He has one of his own," Finn cried. "But he does need help."

Faint frown lines appeared on his father's forehead, but quickly smoothed away. "As I said, anything beyond the Wall is not our concern."

"People are suffering in Rirea, Father. We can help them," Finn said.

He actually believed that he and Rohan could help them. He could drain the excess life from the Empire and Rohan could send it to the life-starved lands of Rirea. But his father's magic was also so powerful, he was certain that Thalanil could save many himself.

If only he would see people outside of the Empire as… people worth saving.

"Why are you so thin, Finrael?" His father's voice was soft. "I know… I know it is not your natural state. So do not claim that."

Finn snapped his head towards his father. His father's red eyes were filled with concern. He thought for a moment he would have to tell his father the ugly truth of his stepfamily, but then he realized he did not need to get into that. At least not yet. He could speak of the kingdom and the suffering overall.

"An answer for an answer, Father," Finn said. "I will answer any question you ask, if you answer the questions I do."

"All right, but either of us can choose *not* to answer a question," his father offered.

"Then that person loses the next question," Finn countered.

After a moment his father nodded. A slight smile was on his lips. "You drive a hard bargain, my son."

Finn blushed and said, "Only when it matters."

Another brief nod. "All right, my question stands. Will you answer it?"

Finn would. In part. He tried not to feel guilty about that, but he knew hearing about his stepfamily would only cause his father pain. And they were beyond the Wall so, according to Thalanil, they didn't count.

"Rirea is starved of life, Father," Finn explained. "You remember I told you that I stole life from the Empire in order to make Tanglewood bloom?"

"I do." Thalanil's tone was neutral as it always was when they even obliquely spoke of his Death Magic.

"If I hadn't done that, Tanglewood's soil would have remained dead and inhospitable to plant life. Livestock are scarce and those there are, are hunted by ravenous wolves. The crops have been leaner every year since the Wall went up--"

"The Wall is for protection. It does not steal life," his father interrupted, looking disturbed nonetheless.

Finn actually believed him. His father wouldn't do that to Rirea, let alone lie about it. He knew that much about him. In fact, Finn had a distinct fear about what might be causing Rirea's lack of life.

Marikoth.

Finn had drained the life of the vines in order for the people to get to the city. He could well imagine Marikoth doing that to all of Rirea, slowly but surely.

"I am not saying the Wall is the cause of it. Only that *since* it has gone up, Rirea's situation has deteriorated sharply over the years," Finn explained. "I'm thin because… because there is no food."

That was the truth. There was no food for *him* and for most people in Rirea. The fact that his stepfamily *hoarded* food while he and the other servants went without didn't have to be explained. Not now anyways.

Thalanil blanched, but then he tried to recover and said coolly, "It is bad land management by the humans. King Rohan doesn't know how to--"

"That's not it," Finn interrupted him."Something is very wrong there. I think--I may be wrong--but I think that Marikoth could be behind it."

Finn studied his father's face closely as he said the Death Mage's name. He wasn't sure what he was looking for.

"Marikoth?" Thalanil said his brother's name as if it haunted him. "What do you know of my--of him?"

Finn could see the pain in Thalanil's eyes. There was some terrible history here. Marikoth spoke of family and betrayal with a lot of bitterness. Had his father been a part of that betrayal?

"I met him when I was near death myself," Finn explained. "He came to me and told me… terrible things."

"When you were near death…"

Thalanil looked faint. He sat up and the pups tumbled off of him. They let out whimpers as at least two of them had been falling asleep on his father's chest. Finn petted the anxious pups and drew a few into his lap.

His father licked his lips and focused on Finn again, "I would have you tell me *everything* that has occurred since you arrived here and how you came to be here."

"It was a question for a question, Father--"

“I will tell you why I do not trust King Rohan De Clare if you answer,” his father interrupted.

Finn’s lips parted and his breathing sped up. This was what he wanted to know. Because he was sure whatever his father believed was some kind of misunderstanding. Rohan was good. Through and through. Truly noble regardless of his royal blood.

“All right,” Finn said.

And Finn had told him. He stressed the courage and goodness of Serxio, Leonid, and, of course, Rohan. His father’s eyes widened at the tale of the spiders that Rohan had slain, as well as the deal that had been made in the first place with the vile creature. He had seemed amazed by Finn and Leonid’s encounter with the tree-like creature as well. Though he did not often interrupt Finn with questions, letting the tale simply pour from Finn’s lips. Those questions he did ask were insightful and caused Finn to go into greater detail as well as think about why something had occurred.

Finn also spoke warmly of Ryleth. She, Sweetfire and Tempest had disappeared after he and his father had met. He assumed that she had fled. He wanted to find her again, though. Not only to thank her for her help, but to seek further assistance from her. She seemed to have knowledge about Death Mages and Rohan’s role as the heir to House Aeturnal that no one else did. He had read the information she’d translated for him again and again about Death Mages and Aeturnal Fae, but it seemed to tell more of a love story than give him practical advice.

While he told his tale, servants found them and brought out pitchers of iced fruit juices and tiny cakes to nibble on. As eager as his father was to hear every detail of his adventures, he urged Finn often to stop to take a sip of cold, refreshing juice or eat some of the moist cake with the rich, creamy frosting. He had to share some with the pups. Tyreon and Skye had both come over to lick the frosting from his fingers, tails wagging like furry banners.

Finally, he was done, having gotten to the moment when they had met in the garden. Silence fell except for the occasional singing of an unseen bird in the trees above them. His father’s gaze was unfocused, clearly thinking hard on all that he had said. Finn licked his lips and wet his throat with more juice. It was also a chance to gather his courage to say what he truly wanted to say.

“Rohan is a good man, Father, and I… I care for him deeply,” Finn said quietly. “Everything I have told you is the truth. I don’t know why you have such anger towards him--”

“Not towards him,” his father interrupted. “Not exactly. But his bloodline is… weak in some ways.”

“Then--”

“His parents were my friends,” his father said and his gaze was distant once more, remembering them. “Or I thought they were. I took a great risk in befriending them considering their Aeturnal blood. But I trusted them. Cared about them.”

Finn’s throat felt thick. Thalanil was said to have killed Rohan’s parents. Ryleth had claimed that was unlikely, but now he would know the truth. Had his father killed Rohan’s parents? In cold blood?

Thalanil continued, “But they were corrupted by my brother’s promises of power.”

Finn frowned. This had *not* been what he expected to hear.

“Marikoth knew the king and queen?” Finn asked.

“He told them that their House Aeturnal heritage entitled them to part of our lands,” his father told him, lips thinning. “And that if--or *when*--he took his rightful place as king of the Eclipse Throne, that he would see to it that some of those lands would be restored to them.”

“They--they betrayed you?” Finn gasped.

Thalanil opened his mouth clearly to say yes, but then he amended, “Yes, I think so, even if they came to regret it. Rirea was… having difficulties even then. It has always been a beautiful, but hard place. Magic and ancient wars have scarred it deeply. I think that was why they listened to Marikoth at all. The thought of possessing more fertile lands would have been… irresistible.”

“So you killed them?” Finn asked, gripping one of the pups too hard. It gave a little yip of distress and he quickly eased his hold on it, petting it gently.

A mirthless smile appeared on Thalanil’s lips. “No, my son, I did not slaughter two people out of pique.”

Finn’s cheeks flooded with hot color. “I’m… I’m so glad.”

“Yes, I imagine the tales you have been told of Fae,” he said almost wearily.

Finn could not help but remember Miles’ taunts about his Fae heritage and how it made him evil and unpredictable. The Fae were not all good either. They were a mixture of good and bad, beautiful and ugly. Just like humans were.

“So what happened to them?” Finn finally asked.

“They requested to meet well away from both Reave Castle and Aymar. They did not even bring their Guard with them,” he said with a frown. “Why they would betray me without any warriors with them--not that it would have mattered--was strange.”

“Maybe they didn’t mean to betray you. Maybe they meant to warn you about Marikoth,” Finn suggested.

“So they ask to meet me in a place far away from prying eyes?” His father’s eyebrows rose.

“Marikoth can make you paranoid. They might have thought there were people in the castle or your palace that couldn’t be trusted,” Finn suggested.

“They were right not to trust him,” his father said dryly.

“Marikoth killed them, didn’t he?” Finn guessed.

His father nodded. “He went after me, but I blocked him and… drew blood. He drained them of life in moments to heal himself. Their bodies withered into mummified things that hardly looked human. They were gone before I could do anything.”

“By the gods, how terrible,” Finn breathed.

He thought of how his own *hunger* had him draining Marikoth. The sick thrill of it all. The desire that was almost sexual to *feed*. How, for a few moments, he hadn’t cared if Marikoth had suffered--let alone died--but only that he was filled with power.

“He did not touch them when he did this?” Finn asked, rubbing his cold, damp hands on his leggings.

“No. Why?”

“When we… fought, we needed to touch one another to take life though I didn’t have to when I destroyed the vines so maybe he just *liked* to touch me when he tried to drain me,” Finn murmured.

He felt his father’s eyes upon him. There were questions there. But his father didn’t ask those.

“Rohan thinks you killed his parents. All of Rirea does. That you killed them, fled and put up the Wall to avoid justice,” Finn stated bluntly. “But you didn’t.”

"Not in the least. Marikoth disappeared after draining their lives. Not wanting to face me yet, I think. And I… I went back to the Empire as fast as I could to erect the Wall," his father said.

"Why did you let people think you were a murderer?"

"Mortals think what they like."

"But you could have warned them about Marikoth! I know Rohan was just a boy, but he has an uncle or something, doesn't he? Someone who was in charge until he was of age? You could have told *him*--"

"Hugues?!" His father laughed bitterly. "Hugues De Clare saw those bodies. He knew my magic. He would have understood immediately that it wasn't I who did that to them!"

Finn's eyes widened. "Why would he do that? Let you take the blame?"

"Because he loved your mother, too. And blackening my name in her heart would have pleased him above all things," his father said with bitterness. "Anything to raise her estimation of *him*."

"It didn't work. I mean she didn't marry him. She married…" Finn broke off.

"Who did she marry? Was he good to her? To you?"

Finn remained silent.

"Your thinness… it is not just because of Rirea's problems, is it?" His father's voice was soft.

"It doesn't matter." Finn shook his head almost violently.

"Finrael… was he cruel to you?" His father reached over and touched Finn's nearest arm.

Yes, Finn thought. *And I believed that you hated me and wanted nothing to do with me. Only one of those things is true.*

But he found himself just staying silent.

"He was," Thalanil breathed. "He was. You were suffering and I did not know. All this time…"

"That's the past, Father. It can't be undone. It can't be changed. Only the present and the future are mutable," Finn finally got out. Yet he was still stuck in the past too. "Why didn't Marikoth take over Rirea then? He'd killed the king and queen. Rohan was still just a boy and he didn't have control of Lightbringer then as he does now."

"Marikoth exists in the shadows. He likes to be unseen," Thalanil answered. "When we would go hunting, he would not stalk prey. He would ensconce himself on a high branch or in a deep thicket and *wait* for prey to come to him. He was incredibly patient. But he also knew where prey would go and there he would wait. So no, he would not take on the burden of running Rirea. He would wait until his prey came to him."

"But you've raised up the Wall so he can't get to you," Finn said.

"And I will not come to him. So he will wait forever," his father's voice was hard.

But he won't. He won't wait. He'll find a way in, Finn thought.

His father's red eyes lifted to the wing of white hair on the side of Finn's head. He tentatively reached out and feathered his fingers through it. Marikoth's hair was all snow white. Finn wondered again if his own would eventually be so if he continued to use Death Magic.

"My father led me to believe that he had killed Marikoth because he was a Death Mage," Thalanil explained haltingly. "Now I understand why he did not. Could not. Even after…"

“If I were to become like Marikoth, I would *want* you to stop me even if that meant death,” Finn found himself saying. “There is something… very wrong with Marikoth now. I can’t explain it. Almost like life is a drug for him and he cannot stop himself from taking it.”

Thalanil drew in a deep breath and let it leave him. “You are not like him. You will never become like him.”

“Father,” Finn began, then dropped his head and bit his lower lip.

“What?”

“We may be safe beyond the Wall from Marikoth, but the people of Rirea are not,” Finn rushed out.

“That is not our concern, Finn.” His father patted the pups before rising to his feet.

“But--”

“It is *not* our concern,” his father repeated in a tone that brooked little argument.

“It may not be yours, but it is mine. I will not forget about Rohan or the people of Rirea. They need help,” Finn said.

His father merely stared at him evenly.

“And, eventually,” Finn paused, “Marikoth will find a way beyond the Wall. He will find a way in here. And, by that time, all possible allies we could have had will be gone and it will be our concern then.”

“You are very brave, Finrael, to press your arguments with me. Most do not,” his father murmured, though he did not sound angry.

“You are not cruel. You may not agree with me, but I don’t think… I don’t think you would ever harm me for speaking out,” Finn said.

His father’s head lifted. “I would *never* hurt you, Finrael!”

And Finn realized in that moment that he had revealed that Gerard Steward *had*. But he gave his father a smile.

“Exactly, so it was not brave of me at all. I’m just persistent,” Finn told him.

“My persistent son.” His father chuckled. Then he offered Finn his hand. “Come with me.”

Finn reluctantly moved sleeping pups from his lap to the soft grass and took his father’s outstretched hand. Thalanil easily helped him to stand.

“Where are we going?” Finn asked, filled with curiosity.

“To give you another lesson.” There was a smile playing around his father’s lips.

“Oh.”

Finn’s shoulders slumped. It would be back to sitting and attempting to memorize words again. He supposed he should get back to it. He’d had a long break. And he and Thalanil had talked. While in some ways it felt like they were farther apart than ever in terms of Rohan and opening the Wall to assist the people of Rirea, Finn felt so much closer to him. And, as he had said, he was persistent and would not be giving up. This was a start between them.

Yet he still walked slowly after Thalanil out of the grove, leaving a sleeping family of wolves behind. It was only when his father led him not back towards where Lord Camrys likely still snored, but instead down a set of steps in the opposite direction that Finn spoke again.

“Father, aren’t we going back for me to learn the Fae dialects and--”

“No. No more of that today.” His father laughed. “I thought a *flying* lesson would be more interesting.”

Finn’s eyes went wide. “Flying?!”

With an almost impish smile, his father said, “What do you think about learning to ride a *dragon*?”

DANGEROUS

Rohan paced outside his uncle's quarters. The rain that had lashed the stones of Reave Castle all afternoon felt like it was lashing his shoulders. He had exhausted his parents' library for information on House Aeturnal and the connection between Death Mages and those ancient Fae. If he could but understand that connection he could understand his own connection with Finn. This would help them both to get control of their powers and use them for their greatest good. His uncle--and his uncle's library--were the only resources he had not tapped yet.

But I cannot trust him! Not anymore, Rohan thought. *Yet to find out what I need to know I must tell him about Finn and myself. Can I take this risk?*

He stopped his pacing and lifted his hand to knock on his uncle's door. But he froze, grimacing. Betrayal still pricked him. Yet did he truly have a choice? Could he not take this risk? No to each. So he knocked.

"Come!" his uncle's voice rose up, muffled, beyond the doors.

The doors were unlocked this time. Rohan strode inside his uncle's sanctuary. The smell of parchment and candlewax filled his nostrils. These were his uncle's scents and they had been ones that filled him with comfort and the sense of being loved since he was a child. Now there was a bitter undertone to those scents that had never been there before.

His uncle was seated in one of two high-backed armchairs before the fireplace where flames merrily crackled and popped. Birchwood hissed and burned, its paper-like skin peeling away in layers as the fire devoured it. The light from the flames was bright enough to read by, but his uncle had plenty of candles lit. The delicate wax tapers filled the room with an additional golden light. On this grim day, it was an inviting sight. Or it would have been.

Hugues had been hunched over one of his leather tomes with its spiderweb-like writing when Rohan came in. But as he approached, his uncle blinked up owlishly at him as if he was not sure who was visiting him. It was clear that he had been so focused on what he had been doing that he didn't recognize Rohan for a moment. But then that familiar smile bloomed on his face.

"Rohan!" his uncle said with evident delight and closed the volume on his lap before putting it aside. He made to rise, but Rohan waved him down.

"Don't get up. I want to talk to you," Rohan said. "It might be a long discussion."

"Please then. Won't you join me?" His uncle gestured to the opposite chair. "A glass of wine? Some cognac?"

"Cognac," Rohan answered as he went to the chair beside his uncle, but did not sit down.

Hugues immediately poured several fingers of the amber fluid into a delicate balloon-like glass and handed it to him. He took the glass and swirled the cognac. It left trails of sweet oiliness on the sides of the glass.

"If this is going to be a long discussion, shouldn't you sit too?" His uncle gestured again to the chair that Rohan had yet to take.

It was a chair that Rohan had sat in countless times. They had spoken late into many evenings with the fire warming their outsides while cognac warmed their insides. They had plotted the rule of the kingdom from here. Rohan had opened up his heart, his mind and his soul to his uncle in that chair. He was going to do so again even as he didn't trust the man any longer. Instead of warmth, he was filled with cold. He finally sank down into it and stretched his legs towards the fire.

Silence fell between them. It was not the easy silence that had been there before. It was thick and had weight enough to crush them both. Rohan leaned forward and rested his elbows on his thighs as he stared into the fire, needing its warmth to thaw him towards his uncle.

"I am… glad to see you here, Rohan," his uncle said tentatively.

"Yes." Rohan knew that was true.

"I wish there was something I could say or do to prove my loyalty to you. I--"

"Don't wish to speak of it," Rohan said gruffly.

Silence fell again. The fire cracked and popped. More wood was turned to embers and then ash. Was Finn seated before a fire? Was he gazing into it and thinking of Rohan? Was he trying to learn the magic of the Death Mages? Rohan was certain he was. Though Rirea had not been good to Finn, the young man still considered it his home.

But will that change the longer he stays with the Fae? Rohan wondered. *If Thalanil is a doting father and offers Finn the life that always should have been his, will Finn want anything to do with Rirea? I was very quick to say that the Queen of Sultane and the King of Bolan would not want me because Rirea had nothing to recommend it. Why would Finn feel any differently?*

Yet his uncle had been the one to speak of *love* back then, too. That love changed everything and made this hard, rocky earth of Rirea a garden in a lover's eyes. But was he being selfish wanting Finn back here? Shouldn't he want Finn to be safe and well cared for beyond the Wall? Their magic was meant to work together, but… No, he couldn't complete that thought. Finn was for him and he was for Finn. He could never doubt that. It was one of those truths the philosophers spoke of as being the ultimate truth with no lie.

"You look very deep in thought," his uncle said quietly.

"I was thinking of love," Rohan answered.

His uncle's eyebrows rose. "*Love*? I seem to remember our last conversation about that not ending well for love's part."

"I was a fool," Rohan said.

Those bushy eyebrows lifted even higher. "You--you met someone? A--A *Fae*?"

The way his uncle said "Fae" told Rohan that Hugues didn't believe any such match could be made to work. Rohan's lips flattened.

"Why did you do it?" Rohan found himself asking.

"Do… what? Oh, oh, yes, the throne." His uncle's brow cleared as he thought he understood Rohan's apparent change of subject. "I thought… Well, I told you. The kingdom was in such dire straits that I felt I had to take the throne--"

"No, not that." Rohan took a swallow of cognac to wash the bitter taste from his mouth. "Why did you lie about knowing King Thalanil?"

His uncle looked down at his blanket covered lap. "I didn't *lie*--"

“Oh, really? You wish to argue that a lie by omission isn’t a *lie*?” Rohan interrupted.

His uncle slumped forward slightly. “No, I suppose not when you put it that way.”

“So why did you never mention this?”

“I didn’t think it mattered.” His uncle shrugged. “What I thought I knew of him was obviously *wrong*. I never thought he would harm a hair on your parents’ heads! But that was incorrect. So what good would it have done? Better to say only what I was certain of. Better not to believe I understood him more deeply than others.”

Rohan stared at him in disbelief. “I took your advice believing you had no connection to him. Looking back on it, that was absurd. My parents knew him well. You were their advisor. How could you not have known him? And yet, I believed you like a fool.”

“No, no, you aren’t a fool. You trusted me implicitly and I--I took advantage of that.” His uncle put a hand up to his right temple. “Speaking of him made me think of *her*.”

Her…

“Maeve Ashton?” Rohan clarified.

He nodded. “The love of my life. I still think about her every day.”

Another flare of anger lit in Rohan. If his uncle thought about Maeve everyday then surely he knew about Finn. And if he knew Finn existed then he was sure he knew what nine hells Finn’s life had been like.

“Did you know she had a son?” Rohan asked gruffly. “By *Thalanil*?”

His uncle stilled. Rohan could not fully see his face as that hand by his temple blocked Rohan’s view. “Y-yes. Yes, I knew that.”

“What’s his name?” Rohan asked, almost pleading for his uncle to lie to him and not to lie to him at the same time.

“He has a Fae name. But she shortened it. I--I don’t quite remember--”

“You don’t remember the *love of your life’s* child’s name?” His disbelief was written into every word.

“Finrael, I think. Finn for short,” he answered, still hiding his face from Rohan.

The urge to snap that hand down was almost overwhelming. Rohan gripped the balloon snifter almost hard enough to shatter it.

“What is his situation? Is he lord of his mother’s estate now? I don’t recall a Finrael or Finn at court,” Rohan pointed out even as his anger rose.

His uncle wetted his lips. “No, no, she remarried and his stepfather is--is the lord, but--”

“How could that be? The inheritance of titles doesn’t work that way, Uncle. You, of all people, know this,” Rohan gritted out. “So try again. Tell another lie to me.”

His uncle’s head snapped towards him. “You--you know him? You know Finrael?”

“I met him in the woods the day that Tyreon appeared. He saved me from the rain,” Rohan told him. He took another swallow of cognac. It tasted almost flavorless to him. Just hot oil flowing down his throat, burning as it went. “When I first met him I thought he must be some nature spirit. He was so beautiful.”

His uncle’s lips parted, but no words came out.

“His stepfather stole his inheritance from him and made him into a practical slave, because he has Fae blood. Royal Fae blood. Not that he knew that. Thankfully, his monstrous stepfather didn’t either or I could only imagine what more evil would have been done to him.” Rohan turned his head and stared hard at

his uncle. “I do not believe that you would have lost track of the love of your life’s child. I do not believe you had to think hard to recall his name. I do not think what I am telling you of his life is a *surprise*. I think you’ve known all along.”

His uncle said nothing. His face was that same pasty white it had been on the throne that day Rohan returned. A droplet of sweat slowly trailed down his face from his temple.

“Did you know what they’d done to him? How he was treated? How thin he is because they did not feed him enough?” Rohan’s voice rose with each question.

This was not what he had intended to ask at all and yet it was what he needed to ask.

“I knew he had been made a servant,” his uncle finally answered.

“Did it please you to think that King Thalanil’s son was on his hands and knees scrubbing floors, taking out chamber pots, starving and freezing in clothes that barely covered him?” Rohan was shaking. He threw the balloon snifter into the fire. Glass shattered and skidded everywhere. The alcohol caused the flames to burn brighter.

Hugues curled in on himself. “You are a better man than me, Rohan.”

“What are you talking about?” Rohan hissed.

The urge to grab his uncle by the lapels and shake him was overwhelming.

“He was the son of my enemy! The son of the murderer of your parents! The love I had for Maeve was the only reason I didn’t…” Hugues’ jaw clenched.

“The only reason you didn’t *kill* him with all the other Fae that you accused of being traitors?”

Horror washed through Rohan. How close had his beloved Finn been to death? When he was a child and his uncle had sentenced Fae to the axe or the rope, he had tried to watch, but couldn’t. He’d run back to his room and buried his face in his pillows, drawing them over his ears to block out every sound. He’d been so ashamed of his weakness back then. Or what he’d perceived as weakness. After all, these were the beings who supported his parents’ deaths. Shouldn’t he want to see them killed? Executed for their treachery?

Finn could have been among them…

“So you let him *suffer*.” Rohan was up and out of the chair, pacing again, and rubbing his jaw as if there was something he needed to wipe away. “Did you enjoy watching it?”

“No, no, I just… he was not my concern. Maeve made her choice by marrying that brute--”

“Oh, so much better to marry *you,* the one who would *let* her son suffer?” Rohan let out a sharp bark of laughter. “Oh, Uncle, you don’t even see yourself! While she may have married a brute, I wonder what you would have done to Thalanil’s son if he had been at *your* mercy.”

“Rohan… you know me. I would never--never have hurt the boy! I just didn’t... Didn’t help him,” Hugues answered and looked down.

“Well, he is out of your reach for now. Finn is with his father. Thalanil did not know he existed until they met unexpectedly in the Empire,” Rohan said. “Finn stayed there to… to save me, Serxio and Leonid. He is amazing. Brave. True. Kind. Wonderful. Loving.”

“You are… close?” Hugues asked carefully.

“He is the one for me,” Rohan answered, hating to share *anything* with this man he felt he did not know at all.

Hugues’ eyes widened. “When you said you were thinking of *love* earlier, you meant him?”

“Yes, Uncle, I meant Finn. Were you not the one who told me that love happens? That it doesn’t wait and that it doesn’t care about convenience? That it comes and overwhelms and… makes one realize that life is so much more amazing than you ever thought it could be.” Rohan swallowed.

His uncle reached for his nearest hand, but Rohan moved out of reach. “I can see that you truly feel this way about Finn.”

“You have no idea.”

“Then my heart hurts for you. Because Thalanil will *never* allow his son to wed a human, let alone a king of Rirea,” his uncle said. “He wouldn’t marry Maeve simply because she was human and he--he did love her.”

Once I get that Wall down… once I know truly how to use the power within me… once Finn is away from him… Rohan thought these things, but said only out loud, “It won’t be Thalanil’s choice in the end.” He stopped in his pacing before his uncle once more. “Besides, his objection would be rather weak.”

“What do you mean *weak*?” But his uncle’s gaze dropped to Lightbringer, which was sheathed at his waist as Rohan never truly let it out of his sight.

Rohan touched Lightbringer’s hilt and the sword glowed so brightly that the light leaked out of the top of the sheath. “I am the heir to House Aeturnal.”

His uncle half rose from his chair and then sank down again as if too overcome to stand. “The Heir? You are the Heir?”

“My powers were triggered there. My connection to the sword was increased. I cannot explain it all. But they recognized who I am there,” Rohan said, remembering the awe in the Fae faces, wanting to touch him, wanting him to bless them.

“Of course it is *you*. It would be *you*,” Hugues breathed, looking stunned to his core. “After all these years though, I wondered if there was enough of their blood left to ignite the gifts within us.”

“You have some powers yourself, don’t you?” Rohan asked. “All of this.” He jerked his head towards all of the spellbooks and the ancient scrolls. “You have some abilities.”

“A small gift. Very small. But you… you are the *Heir* and that means… that means we can truly get back what we’ve lost and more. Rohan! Don’t you see what this means?” His uncle did get up from his chair this time. He was smiling tremulously. “You are the rightful heir to the Empire!”

“I have no interest in that,” Rohan answered flatly.

His uncle blinked. Even if he had any desire to rule yet more land and people, the Empire was Finn’s. If Thalanil were to step aside, Finn would be king of the Empire. Rohan would never get in the way of that.

“But, Rohan, don’t--”

“What I want is to know *everything* there is to know about Death Mages and their connection to House Aeturnal,” Rohan told his uncle.

Hugues’ expression became blank and smooth and unreadable before he asked, “Why would you want to know about that?”

“That is no concern of yours,” Rohan snapped. “You will tell me everything. You will give me every text on this. I will determine the use of it.”

“Death Mages are… Rohan, you don’t understand how dangerous they are,” his uncle murmured.

He thought of that furrow in the forest. But he also thought of how Finn had reached a terrified creature and stopped it from causing harm.

“All of us are capable of being dangerous,” Rohan corrected his uncle. “It is who we are that determines how we use that capability.”

His uncle's eyes were haunted. "I wish that were true. But everything I have read on Death Mages shows that theirs is a life of pain… and madness. Only giving them death can stop the damage they cause."

Rohan's heart clenched in his chest. He shook his head. "You are wrong. And we will find out ways to help one control his powers with my help."

"You know of one? A Death Mage?" Hugues' gaze sharpened. "Is it Finrael? Is Finrael a Death Mage?"

"Uncle, just do as I ask," Rohan growled.

Hugues nodded slowly, but there seemed to be some reluctance in that act. Rohan's hand drifted again to the hilt of his sword.

"But so help me, Uncle, if you keep any more secrets from me…" He met his uncle's eyes, "you will find out how dangerous I am."

LUMINUS

Thalanil led Finn to the base of Aymar's far eastern tower. It was one of many parts of the palace that Finn hadn't yet explored. There was an outside entrance. Thalanil had an impish smile on his lips as he opened the metal-banded, wooden door and gestured for Finn to go inside first.

"There are dragons in the *tower*?" Finn asked while lifting his right eyebrow.

"They are actually wyverns. Not their much bigger cousins, though I have ridden a fully adult dragon. It was an interesting experience, though I would not recommend it," his father explained as they started to ascend a curving set of stairs that spiraled up out of sight. "Wyverns are only 1/10th the size of dragons. We have constructed lairs for them on the top of the tower."

"Lairs?" Both of Finn's eyebrows lifted.

"Indeed. They rather like small spaces to curl up in," his father said.

Finn detected a faint almost ophidian odor in the air. It wasn't unpleasant, more dry, smelling like old paper with an almost spicy undertone. His head shot up as sounds drifted down from up above. Even down here, at the base of the tower, Finn could hear the flapping of great wings and low roars out of draconid throats. His heartbeat sped up and his palms were slick with sweat as his father took one of his hands. Thalanil saw his anxiety and was trying to soothe him. Finn blinked as unexpected warmth filled him. Thalanil might *not* just be tolerating him for the sake of his mother.

"My mount is named Shadeheart. You will love him. He is rather naughty at times, but he is a stout friend," Thalanil enthused.

Speaking of wyverns seemed to have unlocked his father's reticence. Finn would have almost said his father was bubbling with excitement. His feet were light and quick on the stairs and Finn had to hurry to keep up with him.

"A naughty wyvern? That makes him sound cute instead of dangerous. Are they dangerous?" Finn asked.

"They are, but not to those they call friend. I think Lightheart will be the wyvern for you. He is steady and calm. But rider and mount must choose one another."

"*Choose*? You mean the wyvern has to like me?" Finn asked as he clattered up the steps after his father.

It was his father's turn to lift an eyebrow. "*Like*? I suppose that is part of it. But, in truth, the wyvern must find you *worthy*."

Finn swallowed at that. He was a Death Mage. He'd only been a prince for less than a week. Before that he had been a mere servant. Would a wyvern find him *worthy*? That seemed highly unlikely.

At that moment the magical raven that had saved Finn time and time again, not to mention showed him the way he needed to go, soared past them and through a half-open door to their left. He had not seen the raven since it had led him to

Thalanil. Finn's heart lodged in his throat. When the raven appeared there was something important for him to see or do. His father, like everyone other than Marikoth, did not see the bird that was made up of loose feathers, old bones and a ball of sparkling black energy.

"Wait!" Finn cried when they drew opposite the room.

He skidded to a halt, practically jerking his father back down a step, as they were still hand in hand. His heart was in his throat. It was because of *familiarity*. He didn't expect to find anything in Aymar that he would recognize from Tanglewood, but his expectation had been wrong. Here was something that was the *same*. The raven had led him well again.

His father turned to look at what had distracted him from their upwards journey. Thalanil's expression went from curious to blank as if he'd drawn a curtain across his emotions when he realized what had caught Finn's attention. He was no longer smiling or bubbling with excitement anymore. In fact, if Finn had to name the emotions his father was hiding they were pain and also anxiety.

"Finn, there's nothing here that should interest you. The wyverns are waiting--"

"Wait," Finn repeated.

The raven *cawed*!

Finn reached over and pushed open the door fully. It *was* what he thought! A ball of glass--dark at the bottom, but lightening at the top--set in a simple, but elegant wooden stand. The raven perched on top of the ball.

His mother had one of these in Tanglewood. Before her death it had been in the attic, covered with a dark sheet. Now, it was in Miles' bedroom. What would another one be doing here? Had his mother's been a gift from Thalanil? In some ways, while it was lovely, it didn't seem fancy *enough* to be a gift from the Fae king. So it must have some other purpose than simply decorative. The raven flapped its wings.

"What is that? Mother had one. Did you give it to her?" Finn asked.

He was drawn to the object though he had seen one just like it countless times in Tanglewood. He'd actually *dusted* it countless times. The glass ball was forever collecting dust as if it attracted it. This one looked very dusty. Disused. Forgotten. Yet there was something strangely *alive* about it. The raven's sparkly "core" was reflected in the glass. It was as if there were *two* cores.

Finn stepped inside the room, pulling a very reluctant Thalanil after him. His father though did not seem inclined to let go of Finn's hand. The crystal ball was the only object in the circular tower room. Finn stood in front of it and saw his and Thalanil's reflections in the dark part of the glass. He narrowed his eyes. Was there… there *light* at the bottom rising up like a fish coming out of water? The raven tapped its beak against the glass. Finn reached to touch the glass ball's smooth surface. Thalanil caught his wrist.

"Do not touch it, Finrael. This is a Luminus," his father said.

"What is it? What does it do?" Finn resisted the urge to lean closer.

His father was silent for long moments as if debating whether to tell him the truth of what it did or not. "It allows one to see and speak to others over long distances who also have a Luminus."

Finn straightened and spun towards his father. "Did you speak to Mother over this?"

"Yes, it is how we communicated when she was… not here," his father answered and his eyes grew shadowed.

"But how did you do that with the time difference between Rirea and the Empire?" Finn asked.

He tried to imagine speaking to someone in a place where time ran three-times the speed. It would be impossible, wouldn't it?

"When one is within the Luminus' presence, time… stops," his father explained, almost reluctantly. "It is the same near the Wall."

"I see." Finn's gaze flickered between his father and the Luminus. "She had it up in the attic. My stepbrother Miles had me bring it down for his room. He likes pretty things."

Miles actually liked *expensive*-looking things. But most expensive things were pretty too.

"She likely put it in an out of the way spot because she was worried that I would see her within it… or you," his father answered stiffly.

Finn's lips parted. "You mean we could have communicated with this? I--I cleaned it so many times! I'm surprised that--"

"I have not attempted to use it in years," his father cut him off. There was a flash of regret on Thalanil's face. "It pains me to think that I could have known about you before, but did not because…"

Looking at the thick dust that covered everything in this room, Finn guessed, "It was too painful. You thought she was ignoring you. And then, when she died, you thought that there was no one left at Tanglewood for you to speak to."

His father gave a sharp nod. "I was wrong, of course. I believe if I had seen you, for just a moment, I would have *known*… but that is the past. It cannot be undone."

Finn pressed his lips together for a moment. His father's words had sparked his own regrets. He decided to share them, "I used to think…"

"What?" his father asked, curiosity spiking his tone.

"I used to wonder about you. I mean not *you* specifically as I had no idea you were my father. But who my father was. What was he like? Did he care about me? That sort of thing," Finn admitted. He felt Thalanil's gaze upon him. His father was staring at him so intently, wanting to know the feelings behind these words. "At the same time, I told myself I didn't care about the answers to any of those questions. Just as often as I wondered about you, I reminded myself that you didn't matter. Because you must not have wanted me or Mother, let alone loved us, to leave us in Rirea after the Wall came up."

"Finrael…" His father's eyes were full of pain. He touched Finn's cheek.

Finn was shocked when he felt hot tears behind his eyes. "I wish you had used the Luminus when I was cleaning it. Just to see your face. Just to know that you were thinking of me."

"If I had seen you, I would have come for you. I swear it." His father's hand cupped his cheek, but Finn remained staring steadfastly at the Luminus. The warm, loving expression became one of concern as if he read more in Finn's face than Finn wanted him to see. He stated more than asked, "You were hurt. People hurt you."

"Yes, but not everyone. There were good people in my life," Finn assured him as he wiped tears away. "People who don't know what's happened to me now. I know they are worried about me. They have no idea if I'm alive or dead." He turned his face into his father's touch and covered Thalanil's hand with his own. "Will you show me how to use the Luminus? I want to speak to them. I want to assure them I'm alright. And I want to make certain that they are, too. My stepfather is, as you intuited, not a good man."

He was thinking of Jacob, Magna and Emmott especially. He knew that they would be worried sick about him. Maybe even Miles and Christopher might be *mildly* concerned. His stepfather would just be angry that he wasn't there to make Tanglewood bloom. Finn's heart tightened at the thought of the people and the

estate being under Gerard's rageful eye without him there to help lighten the load.

And, of course, there was a wild chance he could also get word to Rohan, too.

His father was not looking at him. His gaze was distant. His lips were pursed. He was clearly considering Finn's request, though.

"I will consider it, Finrael, but I think it better if you merely leave these people behind," his father said.

"Why? Why do you say that? Could you do that? Friends and family? Just… just leave them?" Finn's hand dropped from his father's in disappointment. "What are you afraid of?"

His father's crimson gaze focused upon him. "I am not afraid."

"I said I would stay with you. I *want* to stay with you, but I also want to communicate with those I care about. Why would you object to this?" Finn asked. "And before you say it, Rohan is *not* his parents. He has no desire for--"

"So it is *Rohan* you really wish to speak to and not these other people after all?" His father asked archly.

Finn gritted his teeth. "I want to speak to *all* of them. But yes, I do want to speak to Rohan, too, because, as I told you, I care deeply for him."

"That will fade." His father's tone was so final.

Finn stared hard at his father. "Did your love for my mother *fade*? I can tell it hasn't. It *haunts* you. She haunts you. Do you want me to be haunted by Rohan?"

His father grimaced. "I am trying to *spare* you that, Finrael! You will forget him. It will be best. The Wall must remain closed."

His father thought they could hide behind the Wall and pretend that people weren't suffering--and that Marikoth wasn't lurking--beyond it, but he would never forget. Everything in Finn wanted to argue against this.

Arguing with him more now will only harden his position.

Finn's eyes slid to the Luminus. He would come back here on his own and try to contact someone in Tanglewood. And then… then maybe he could get word to Rohan.

"Come, Finrael, I wish to take you flying. Please let us not quarrel any longer," Thalanil said, trying to put the earlier uncomplicated happiness into his voice, but not completely succeeding. "The wyvern know we are here. They grow restless for our company."

"I don't want to fight either. You know that simply because I care for others doesn't mean that I…" Finn swallowed. Was he reading his father right or was he being presumptuous about what he meant to the Fae king? He decided to take a chance. "It doesn't mean that *you* are not as important to me as they are."

Thalanil gave him a faint smile. "I… I am glad of that. You are… you are precious to me, but you know that."

Finn hadn't known that. Not exactly. And the warmth that filled him made a lie of all those times he had told himself that his father didn't matter to him. Thalanil did. So very much. He just had to figure out a way to change his father's mind. The raven shot out of the room and up the stairs, heading for the wyverns' lairs. Obviously, there were more revelations than the Luminus that awaited him in this tower.

Finn gave a smile. "Let's go dragon-riding then."

THE MISSING

When Rohan was not searching for the tree with leaves of glass, he was studying the books his uncle had given him that had even the vaguest mentions of the Aeturnals or Death Mages. Today was no exception.

The rain from the day before had continued on all night and into the morning. The showers had mostly petered out by early afternoon, but the ground under the trees in the Lupine Woods was saturated with poison and therefore unsafe. So there would be no searching today for the tree. Rohan buried himself in studying the past instead.

He could not sit still as his anxiety about Finn and the deteriorating state of his kingdom weighed down on him like heavy chains. So he walked the castle's halls with his head in one of the leather and metal bound books that smelled of age and dust. The language it was written in was Fae, but not a dialect he had been taught. Yet Rohan found himself piecing together the words slowly and then more quickly as if he were *remembering* the language rather than *learning* it.

This book traced the history of the Aeturnals and the alleged cause of their fall. The Aeturnals' reign had lasted over 40,000 years. Such a timeframe seemed impossible to even contemplate. Rohan felt dizzy with it as if the present were a precipice and the past a sheer drop before him. The Aeturnals were responsible for building Aymar and all the seasonal palaces in the Empire. They had even laid the first stones of Reave Castle at the very end of their reign as they had intermarried with Rohan's family.

Almost all magical weapons were created by the Aeturnals too. Lightbringer--or Vudine, the Sword of the Sun, as it was known in the Fae language--was one of the most ancient of these and one of the most *powerful*. It could do far more than destroy spiders or simply hold energy. It was said that whole armies could be obliterated with a single sweep of its blade. But that could only be done with the assistance of a Bonded One. That was the closest translation he could come to the title of the person who was bonded to the ruling Aeturnal king or queen. Rohan thought he knew the *modern* description of that person: *Death Mage*.

The Bonded One was able to feed great quantities of power into the Aeturnal royal. The Aeturnal royal could then focus that power and use it to create devastation or life or enchantments or to build cities or… The possibilities were endless. These two bonded magic users had almost *godlike* power. And that--according to this author--was why the gods themselves decided to strike the Aeturnals down and curse the Bonded Ones, severing them from one another forever.

Despite the longevity of the Aeturnals' rule, most evidence of them had been wiped out and forgotten by the time that this book had been written. It was said that

the Ravenspars were eliminating all knowledge of the Aeturnals from Fae history.

And that is why I must write this book, the author, a long ago ancestor of Rohan's, penned. *For while the palaces they built like Aymar and the magical weapons they crafted and enchanted like Lightbringer still survive, the Ravenspars would have us forget who truly made them.*

Why?

Is it jealousy? Do they not want their own reign to be overshadowed by the one that came before it? No. For the Bonded Ones were from the Ravenspar line. This is their history as much as the Aeturnals.

I believe that the Ravenspars do this so that the gods will forget us all and do no further harm. But the blood of House Aeturnal runs strong in De Clare veins and I would not have us forget our past. I am not certain though whether I am writing this book to glorify that past or as a warning to future generations of my family to tread carefully and not draw the gods' wrath again.

Rohan's head jerked up from the book as he entered the main hall. Familiar voices raised in an argument distracted him from his ancestor's warning words. He snapped the book shut and tucked it under his arm.

"You cannot be serious about this, Serxio! You cannot stand the cold, the wet, or the *outdoors*!" Leonid's voice rose up from Rohan's left.

"I told the king my plan! He was in agreement that it was a good one. I will travel the Royal Road between Reave Castle and Aymar Palace. When I reach the Wall, I will wait with the king's colors until I see a Fae!" Serxio sounded a little shrill, but very determined.

Rohan headed towards his two friends. Serxio was dressed in a crimson tunic slashed with gold. He was pulling on a black cloak lined with fur by the doors that led out into the courtyard. With Serxio were three pages. Two boys and a girl. They, too, were in versions of the crimson and gold colors. These were the De Clare colors and Rohan felt a pang of loss at the memory of his parents in those colors. He rarely donned them himself.

"My king!" Leonid caught sight of him first and bowed low. His Guard captain was in his practical leather armor again, though a new set, as his last one had been left in the Fae Empire.

"Leonid. Serxio. Everyone. No need to bow," Rohan assured them as he stopped a few feet from them.

Leonid straightened and said, "Good to see you, my king. Could you tell Serxio he is being an idiot?"

"An idiot?" Rohan's eyebrows lifted. His lips twitched into a smile, but he smoothed it out.

"My king," Serxio intoned and swept even lower than Leonid with the pages attempting to seemingly touch their foreheads to the floor. "Would you tell Leonid that I am quite capable of riding down a road and holding up a sign?"

"That doesn't sound beyond him, Leonid," Rohan admitted.

"Thank you, my king! I can see *you* value my skills and--"

"You'll have the pages hold up the sign, Serxio, if I know you, and I do!" Leonid sniped back.

The pages looked amongst themselves. The girl smiled at the teasing between the lord and the guard, but once she realized that Rohan had noticed, she quickly looked down at the floor once more.

"Holding the sign will distract me from looking for any Fae that come near the Wall for a look. That is far more important than manual labor," Serxio insisted, sniffing. "Besides, the pages are happy to do it. Aren't you, pages?"

The pages all nodded, but there were some twitches of lips similar to Rohan's.

"Bah! It's wet and miserable out! You'll get as far as the end of the bridge before you turn back wanting some wine and a fire!" Leonid crossed his arms over his chest, still looking unhappy about it though. He was clearly worried about Serxio. "But if you actually make it to the Wall, don't you be calling for me! I'm on duty and I can't go and save you!"

Rohan studied both men. Both looked dissatisfied. Rohan shook his head. The day truly was gray and ugly. No one in their right mind would want to go out into it. Serxio, with his love of comfort, would be the last person to do so yet he was bound and determined to head out. He was insisting on it. He did love a ball--which Rohan had promised if he could reach Finn--but Rohan was certain that wasn't all that was motivating the foppish lord.

He's worried about Finn, Rohan realized. *That is the reason he would choose to do this now. Well, I cannot let him do it alone.*

"Gentlemen, I suggest that we *all* go together. The three of us," Rohan suggested. "Surely, Leonid, you can find another to cover you here."

"Of course, my king!" Leonid said smartly.

Rohan looked at the young people. "The pages… you can all enjoy the day *indoors*. We can hold up the sign for Serxio."

The pages perked up. Rohan gestured for them to go back to their duties. All three scampered away as quickly as possible in case he changed his mind.

"I thought you were going to have a tent and all to stay by the Wall as long as it took, Serxio," Leonid remarked as he took in the bags the pages had left around Serxio's booted feet.

None looked to have the makings of a tent in it. Most were filled with food and wine along with a ridiculous umbrella of yellow fabric with tassels. Rohan smiled and shook his head. Serxio ate when he was nervous. He probably anticipated being terrified being on the Royal Road waiting for Fae to show up and, hopefully, for wolves not to. Fondness filled him for his friends.

"I think we will go scout out the area today," Rohan suggested. "I am not keen on having Serxio spend the night out there… just yet. We'll leave the note with my seal attached to a standard. That will attract the Fae's attention, I hope."

Serxio--who had perked up at his words about not spending the night outside--heard the "just yet" and crumpled a little bit.

"Very well, though I am bound and determined to stay there in case Finn wanders by. He might go to the road himself looking for us!" Serxio exclaimed.

Rohan's heart twisted at the thought of Finn standing there and looking in vain through the glass towards the Rirea side of the Wall.

Leonid though said what Rohan actually believed, "Ach, no! King Thalanil won't be letting Finn wander anywhere near the Wall. He was pretty clear that he wants Finn and Rirea worlds apart. I just hope he hasn't moved the boy to a palace farther in."

Again, Rohan felt his heart twist, but he knew this was just fear. "I doubt that, Leonid. The Fae are very mindful of the seasons. The king would not wish to leave his summer palace. His people expect him there. No, I'm sure that he thinks his powers more than enough to keep Finn away from us."

"But Finn is clever," Serxio said as he fussed with his crimson tunic. "He'll find a way to get word to us. I know he will."

"Yes, I think you may be right." Rohan smiled, thinking that Finn was more than clever. The young man had stayed to keep them safe but he was also sure that Finn wouldn't leave it at that. "Well, let us get on our way. I just have to put this

back in my rooms."

He hefted the book up as he said it. As much as he wanted to read more about the Aeturnals, he was glad to be doing something physical. Besides, he had a long evening to spend poring over its contents.

"Find out anything in that?" Serxio asked as he pointed at the book.

"Lots and nothing at all," Rohan admitted. "I'll tell you about it on our ride."

"I'll get the horses saddled then," Leonid said. "Meet us out in the courtyard?"

Rohan nodded before turning on his heel. He practically ran from the hall to his rooms. He could have had a servant take the volume, but he didn't want these precious books in anyone else's hands. Besides, he had to change from his light pants and shirt to his leather armor. It was his secondary armor, because just like Leonid's, his original one had been lost in the Fae Empire. This one fit just as well but it wasn't completely broken in yet. As he slung Lightbringer over his back and fitted the crossbow to hang from his waist, he let himself hope that Finn would somehow know that he was thinking of the young man and trying to get to him.

Not just trying. I will get to him.

As he hurried back down to the courtyard, he passed down the hallway that led to his uncle's rooms. Hugues was in there doing more research on the tree with leaves of glass. If they could not be physically searching for the tree he would search his books. Rohan felt that now familiar twist of his heart that he experienced whenever he thought of his uncle.

Hugues giving him all these books on House Aeturnal hadn't healed the breach between them. The more Rohan found out about his family in those books, the more he realized how little he'd been told. His uncle's excitement at his ability to wield Lightbringer told him that Hugues had hidden his past from him. So his distrust, instead of abating, had *grown*.

He dragged his gaze away and headed to the courtyard. Serxio and Leonid were already mounted on their horses. He wished Tempest was there, but Thunder was a good horse. Just not as good as Tempest. He easily vaulted into the saddle.

"Let's get to the Wall!" Rohan grinned.

However, just like Leonid had claimed earlier, they didn't make it past the end of the bridge. But not because they were wishing for a drink or hot fire--though Serxio was already fussing that his cloak wasn't quite warm enough--but because their path was blocked by some very angry townsfolk. The mayor of Dawnmore--a plump, soft-handed man in his mid-fifties named Wornton--was also there. He had practically been bowled over as he had tried to stop the townsfolk from approaching Rohan. But the crowd of anxious people had not backed off.

Mayor Wornton waved pudgy arms around. His fingers were bespangled with many rings and glinted as he cried, "The king does not need to be bothered in this manner for a few missing people--"

"It's not a *few*! My family is missing from their farm!" A woman with pale cheeks and wispy gray hair cried.

"My wife went to see her family up north and never showed up!" Another yelled.

"My brother went out last night to the pub and hasn't returned!" Another shouted.

"It's not just the homeless whose disappearances you can ignore anymore, Mayor!" Another woman, this one young and rosy-skinned, shouted.

There were "ayes" and "damn the Mayor" and "we will be heard"! Leonid came to position his horse between Rohan and the people, but Rohan waved him off. He slid off his saddle, handing his reins to Serxio, before stepping up to the crowd.

“Tell me what is going on,” Rohan commanded.

“Janie, you speak. You tell it best,” the rosy-skinned woman urged the elder woman who had spoken first.

Janie, looking paler than before, smoothed her hands over her skirts and bowed to him awkwardly.

“There is no need for that. Tell me, what is the problem,” Rohan requested.

Swallowing awkwardly a few times, she began, “There have been disappearances, your majesty. First, it was the homeless. People that--though it is wrong to say and think--were hardly noticed whether they were there or not. But some of us realized that the beggars we’d usually see near the markets were gone. One by one, night by night, they disappeared and did not return.”

“Is this true, Mayor Wornton?” Rohan asked sharply. “You have not brought any word about people in the *city* being missing.”

He had heard of farmers near the Lupine Woods disappearing. But that was, unfortunately, usual as the wolves from the forest preyed on their livestock and them. Though they had not seen many wolves--or *any* wolves actually--in the woods himself recently. But he had still thought the missing were due to those predators. These disappearances, though, could not be assigned to the wolves as they never came into the city.

“Beggars have no home, your majesty,” Mayor Wornton said, his hands dancing between them. The jeweled rings glittered in the sun.

“Meaning?” Rohan asked.

“They come and go! If they are not on one bit of road with their hands out that does not mean anything has happened to them!” the mayor insisted. “They’ve just moved on.”

“That’s not true!” Janie shook her head almost violently. “Graham has been right by the market for twenty years! Every day. Rain or shine. He hasn’t just moved on! Something has happened to him!”

“And more than him,” the rosy-cheeked woman added, hands on ample hips. “There’s not been a beggar in sight.”

The mayor let out an ugly chuckle. “Can you believe, my king, that they are upset about the *lack* of beggars? It is just the Guard doing good work in moving them along, not letting them loiter! But some people will complain about anything!”

Rohan did not laugh along with the man. A frown, deep and dark, crossed his handsome face. “*All* of my people matter to me equally from the lowest to the highest.”

“O-of course! I just meant--ah, I meant--”

“What this *means* is that I may be calling for a special election for your current position, Mayor Wornton, for someone who cares about *all* of Dawnmore’s citizens,” Rohan said sharply.

The mayor went pale and his hands danced between them again. “Oh--oh, no, no, that won’t be necessary! I will have the Guard search high and low for the missing--ah, missing beggars.”

“No need. I will order it and command it myself,” Rohan said coldly. He turned to Serxio and Leonid. “I’m afraid our mission to the Wall must wait. We must find out what has happened to the people.”

His heart ached. He had little confidence that going to the Wall would reach Finn. But it was *something*. Yet he knew that Finn would want him to take care of his people first.

“Of course, my king,” Leonid said.

“Goodness, we must help!” Serxio agreed.

Rohan turned back to the mayor and townsfolk. “Tell me everything about the missing. Their names, occupations, hobbies, habits. I need to know where they resided, where they bedded down, where they begged. We will find them.”

Dead or alive, Rohan added silently, *we will find them.*

WORTHY

The roar of wyverns vibrated in Finn's bones and shook the tower's stone steps beneath his and Thalanil's feet. The raven soared ahead of them, first to break out into the open, before he and his father emerged at the top of the tower. The sunlight blinded Finn at first. He blinked and things slowly resolved.

The top of the tower was open to the sky except for a series of large nooks that ringed the outer edge.

Lairs! Those are the lairs for the wyverns that Father mentioned.

He hung back, behind his father, feeling the power of the wind up here and scenting the ophidian smell of the wyverns. A smell that would usually spell danger. Thalanil reached over and squeezed his arm, smiling encouragingly at him. Finn smiled back, but he thought his own grin probably looked brittle.

A roar erupted from a nearby lair and Finn nearly jumped four feet into the air. He clutched his father. It was the first time he had reached out for Thalanil without thought. His father curved a protective arm around him and ran a hand through his hair. Finn looked up into Thalanil's face. His heart was still in his throat from the roar, but Thalanil's tranquil expression calmed him.

He turned back to where the roar had originated from. He squinted as he thought he saw movement in one of the nearest lairs that measured about twenty feet tall and just as wide and deep. He caught sight of a flash of scales when a long tail whipped out into the sunlight before it disappeared back into the darkness.

Wyvern, Finn breathed. *Will they find me worthy?*

Before, he'd been a little nervous about this worthiness concept, but he had figured it would be like any high-strung animal experiencing a new person. But now… now he was not so sure. There might be more to it than that. Everything about the Fae was magical so why not their mounts too?

"They make one's heart soar, do they not?" His father asked, looking invigorated.

Finn shook himself and gave his father a weak smile. "Yes, they are magnificent from what little I can see."

"They are being shy. Don't worry. They will come out. They are as curious about you as you are about them," Thalanil assured him.

A male servant dressed in a greenish gray tunic and dark leggings bowed as soon as he caught sight of them. He reminded Finn of Jacob. He even had Jacob's dark skin and easy grace, but he, of course, had the red eyes and pointed ears of the Fae. Yet those who worked closely with animals had the same type of souls in Finn's opinion. His heart clenched as he was sure that Jacob was worried about him at this moment. Thalanil quickly waved the servant to his feet as he began to bow.

"Elion, how are you?" Thalanil asked with a true smile on his face.

While his father had always been polite and respectful to the servants--something his own stepfather had not been--this was the first time that Finn was seeing any familiarity. Finn guessed that Thalanil and Elion were friends just like he was with Jacob. Their friendship had, undoubtedly, bloomed over their love of wyverns.

Elion returned the greeting eagerly, "My king! Shadeheart is sulking. You have not come up to ride him in too long."

Thalanil's gaze shot towards a lair to their right where something dark coiled and glared out at them with flame-like eyes. But his father did not appear afraid. In fact, he laughed gently and spoke lovingly to the sulking creature.

"Shadeheart, I explained that Finrael was here and I had to stay close to the ground! But I am with you now." His father's voice was warm but also cajoling. There was a snuffle and a fiery snort from the lair in response. His father let out a fond laugh. "Shadeheart! Do not be angry with me." Thalanil put an arm around Finn's shoulders. "This is Finrael. He wants to meet you. Don't you want him to see your magnificence?"

Those red eyes narrowed but there was a scratching sound as large claws scraped against stone. A wyvern stalked out towards them, unfurling from the darkness. His scales were an iridescent dark blue, almost black. His massive head was topped with snow white horns. From the tip of his long snout to his tail, he was fifteen-feet long and almost as tall when he stood up on clawed limbs. Shadeheart moved sinuously, almost slithering across the rooftop to Thalanil.

Finn froze as Shadeheart drew near to him, but whether it was because he was fascinated or too frightened to move was unclear even to himself. A bit of both, he realized, as that massive head shifted under his father's hands, wanting to be petted. Thalanil stroked the scaly head and kissed the snout as he spoke in one of the Fae dialects. Shadeheart let out a low purr, almost like a gigantic cat, and his flame-colored eyes closed with the ministrations. But the moment that Finn so much as shifted a foot, those eyelids shot open and the wyvern was glaring at him.

Will Shadeheart find me worthy?

Shadeheart's nostrils flared as he took in Finn's scent. His eyes widened in alarm then narrowed as he regarded Finn with suspicion. The skin between Finn's shoulder blades tightened.

He knows I'm a Death Mage, Finn realized with a start. *How does he know that?*

The wyvern's wings fluttered and puffed up, making Shadeheart appear larger than he already was. Shadeheart withdrew his head from under Thalanil's hand and started to circle Finn. Finn turned as the wyvern moved around him, never losing sight of Shadeheart's red eyes.

"Shadeheart, what are you doing?" His father demanded, eyes widening in dismay at the wyvern's antipathy towards him.

It knows, Finn thought again. *It knows what I am. Can any Death Mage be worthy?*

Shadeheart made a low rumble. Its lips skinned back from its teeth. And, oh what teeth they were! Triangular and sharp as knives. They could have sliced Finn in half with one bite.

"I think the young prince should leave the rooftop," Elion said, a sheen of sweat appearing on his upper lip as the wyvern circled and hissed.

But Finn found himself unwilling to leave. If he did, his father would never let him come up here again. And though it would not be said, Finn knew that Thalanil would think he was *unworthy*. And he realized he could not bear that, so Finn

remained where he was.

The stable master turned and grabbed a long staff similar to the ones the Battle Mages carried. It had been leaning against one of the lair's stone walls. Elion's staff had a dark blue crystal that emitted electrical sparks. Bravely, he placed himself between Finn and Shadeheart. He thrust it towards Shadeheart.

"Enough of this, Shadeheart! Get back in your lair! Get back!" Elion yelled.

"Shadeheart!" Thalanil's voice filled with command. "You will stop this! This is Finrael! My son!"

But the wyvern ignored them. Shadeheart was no longer circling Finn. But his head was low to the ground. His wings lifted menacingly at his sides. His claws tapped on the cold stone.

"You need to listen to your master, Shadeheart!" Elion shouted and thrust the sparking staff at the wyvern again.

Shadeheart reared back and hissed, but he didn't retreat into his lair. His father's hands were suddenly limned with magic. His eyes were like furnaces. His voice was deadly deep as he stated in no uncertain terms, "If you do not stop, Shadeheart, you will feel my anger!"

And though his father's voice held no grief or even the slightest doubt about using his magic on the wyvern, Finn knew that to say this--let alone go through with it--hurt his father dearly. And Finn realized in that moment that his father cared for him more than the wyvern he clearly adored.

I have to put a stop to this, Finn thought. *I will not have Father harm the wyvern he cares for. If I am not worthy, so be it, but I will not let my father pay for that!*

Elion and Thalanil were now standing between Finn and Shadeheart. Finn stepped out from behind them until he was a foot away from Shadeheart's massive jaws.

"Finrael!" His father's cry of his name was strangled with terror for him, but Finn was strangely not afraid at all.

"It's all right, Father," Finn said, feeling totally calm. He was completely at peace just like when he had faced the tree creature in Ryleth's abandoned village. He stood there and opened himself up to the wyvern.

See what I am, Shadeheart, Finn told the wyvern mentally. *Know what you face.*

You should drain it. Your father would understand, the voice that was and wasn't his own said. It came from the direction of the bird. *Such disrespect deserves death, don't you think? Make them fear you. Make them respect you. Make them all know that you are not to be trifled with.*

Finn knew that the raven was not just referring to Shadeheart, but to his father as well. If Finn expected his father to listen to his wants and needs then maybe he should *make* Thalanil know what he was capable of. Nausea filled Finn at the very thought of harming anyone to make them do as he wished. That was *not* who he was.

No, I will not drain him. Shadeheart thinks he is protecting Thalanil! He does not understand that I would never hurt him, Finn answered the bird.

Once more you refuse to drain life, the bird--it was the raven speaking, he was sure of it--said almost wearily. *You will come to regret it sooner than you think.*

Why? Is it because of whatever is behind those chains? Finn asked.

No… that is a gift for you… though you do not appreciate all I do, the raven said.

I do appreciate you, but I don't want to harm Shadeheart, he said, *or anyone else for that matter.*

We will see. Fate has a way of ignoring our wants and wishes, the voice drifted off.

Shadeheart regarded him with disturbingly intelligent eyes. But it was no longer hissing as he faced it seemingly unafraid and unarmed. Finn took a single step towards the wyvern. Shadeheart puffed its wings out even more. Finn smiled this time though. He understood what the wyvern was doing and why.

"You're big and bad, aren't you?" Finn asked the wyvern. "You want me to know that."

Shadeheart's eyes narrowed and it fluffed its wings again, but this time in an almost self-conscious manner. His father slowly drew even with Finn. His hands were still illuminated with magic.

"Finrael," his father's voice held a note of warning.

"There's no danger. Shadeheart just senses…" Here Finn paused before he finally finished, "my magic. And he wants to keep you safe. Once he realizes that we both want to keep you safe, we'll be friends. You'll see."

Finn caught the flash of confusion on Elion's face. Clearly, word of what he had done on the way to Aymar from Tradavor hadn't reached the tallest tower of the summer palace yet despite the fact that servants usually knew everything. But Ryleth, Tela and Thomas had disappeared after he had met Thalanil and the other villagers had scattered. Besides, they would likely be more intent on finding roofs to go over their heads and food in their bellies than to tell anyone of import about him. But Elion not knowing also meant that his father had informed no one of his magic either, because that would have flowed around the palace as quickly as water. That saddened him. He was still a secret in some ways.

"Finrael, he should know you would never hurt me," Thalanil said, breaking Finn out of his thoughts. There seemed to be more in that statement. Not just that Shadeheart knew, but that *Thalanil* knew that Finn would not hurt him despite the fact that Finn was a Death Mage and, perhaps, *unworthy*.

"He loves you. He just wants to make sure," Finn said as he took another small step towards Shadeheart.

I may be unworthy, but it would please Father so much if you let me touch you, Finn thought.

He took in a deep breath and then slowly extended his right hand towards Shadeheart's head. The wyvern just as slowly moved towards that hand. Shadeheart lowered his head so that it was underneath Finn's hand then lifted up underneath it. Finn felt the wyvern's wild life force. Like the tree creature, he sensed it calling to him. He reached with his magic, not to take, but just to connect. For a moment, he felt Shadeheart's mind as his own. The call of the wind. The brilliant blue of the sky. The faint hunger for meat. The joy at seeing Thalanil. Finn smiled and sent back his own thoughts in as simplistic terms as he could. The excitement at seeing the wyvern. The joy at the thought of flying. His desire to make his father happy.

"What is happening, Finrael?" his father whispered.

"They're… talking," Elion murmured in awe.

Shadeheart was purring constantly now. Their eyes were locked. But it was not a contest of wills, but now of understanding.

We are allies. We will take care of Father, Finn thought.

Shadeheart gave a smoky snort of agreement before eagerly nosing him for pets. Finn let out a laugh.

"You are greedy for attention like Sweetfire. Well, I cannot deny you the affection you want," Finn said.

The wyvern's skin was rough and warm as if heated by a fire within. Finn smiled as his fingers slowly moved over the scaly hide. Shadeheart's crimson eyes half-closed in pleasure. Everyone visibly relaxed.

His father finally smiled. "You are my son. You are Maeve's son. You are *worthy*."

Or Shadeheart did this to please you, but either way, I do not care. You are happy, Finn thought.

"And Shadeheart is worthy of being your faithful mount," Finn answered. "I am glad he is so protective of you."

Finn moved both of his hands over that magnificent head. Shadeheart's eyes were now completely shut. He stroked along the wyvern's mighty neck and slowly drifted his hands over the powerful body. The wings were now tucked tightly against his sides and they fluttered only slightly as Finn skimmed his fingertips over the membranes that were stretched across the bony structure. The tail curled around Finn's waist when he reached the wyvern's back. Shadeheart's long, sinuous neck formed a "U" shape as he turned around to look at Finn.

"Looks like he doesn't want to let the prince go," Elion laughed as he stowed the staff away once more. There was no tension left in the stable master. He knew there was no danger there any longer.

"Indeed not," his father said, joining in with the laughter.

Finn stroked Shadeheart's tail that still curled around his waist. "He is a good protector."

"Shadeheart, I thought that Lightheart and Finrael would be a good match. What do you say?" his father asked the wyvern.

Shadeheart merely looked, unblinking, at Finn. It was then that Finn felt something from the lair on the opposite side of the tower from them. A life force. So brilliant. So glittering. So powerful. The raven *cawed*.

Finn felt his smile die. Shadeheart cocked his head to the side in some confusion at his change of mood. Finn patted the wyvern one last time before he looked for the raven. His eyes scanned the tower. He soon found it.

The raven was seated on top of a lair that was larger than all of the others. Maybe twice the size. There were heavy chains across the opening, too, which were not present on any of the others. Finn straightened and was sure he looked like a pointer dog. The raven *cawed* and tapped its beak against the stone top of the lair. It wanted him to see what--or *who*--was inside. Shadeheart let out another smoky snort before nosing him for more pets, but Finn only managed a few absent strokes.

"Father, is there something… *special* about that lair?" Finn asked about the chain-clad lair.

His father turned stiffly as if he didn't want to look at it. "That? Ah, *that* is Silver Soul's lair."

"*Silver Soul*?" Finn said the name as if it had a *taste*. An exotic yet familiar taste.

He was not surprised when, between one blink and the next, the strands of light appeared streaming out of the lair. They were blue-white and brilliant. They were the same that he had seen when facing that tree monster at the village. But there were more strands and more power emanating from them. Silver Soul had ten times the life force than that creature had. Finn drew in a deep breath as if he could *smell* the power, the *life*. Hunger filled him and he swallowed thickly.

"Could I… could I meet Silver Soul? Maybe she--is it a she--"

“Yes, she is female, but no, Finrael. Silver Soul is not--not for you. Not for anyone actually,” his father said quietly, red eyes dark with something Finn could not read.

“She’s a wyvern queen,” Elion explained. “We have to keep her locked up because… well, she doesn’t like people. She doesn’t like *anyone*, not even her own kind, actually.”

“She was my mother’s mount,” his father explained.

“A queen for a queen,” Finn murmured.

“Yes, exactly. No one has ridden her since then,” Thalanil stated. “I would have released her long ago, but she would become a deadly menace and kill our people. So she must stay imprisoned.”

The raven tilted its head at Finn and tapped the top of the lair again. The glowing strands of life plucked at Finn’s soul. He knew he was meant to meet this queen. She was a *gift* according to the raven. But his father and Elion were dead set against it. They wouldn’t understand why he was compelled until he told them.

“You remember the raven I told you about, Father?” Finn asked, not taking his eyes from the bird.

His father frowned then nodded. “Yes, the one made of bone and energy? Your guide?”

Finn nodded. “It’s here. Atop her lair. I am destined to meet Silver Soul.”

Shadeheart suddenly let out a loud call that echoed in the air. Twin, thin slits of glowing silver appeared within the chained lair. They were low to the ground. She had likely been resting her head on her forelegs, sleeping. But now she was awake. Shadeheart may have woken her, but that silver gaze was *locked* on Finn. Shadeheart made that strange, barking call again and nudged Finn towards the chained lair. But Thalanil’s right hand landed firmly on Finn’s left shoulder and kept him where he was.

“She’s killed Fae, Finn,” his father said. “The keeper before Elion… one who had raised her since an egg. She killed him. I care not what this--this *bird* wants. Silver Soul will remain caged and you will keep safe.”

Finn couldn’t take his gaze off of Silver Soul’s eyes that tracked him even as his father led him over to meet the wyvern Lightheart. Even when he and his father lifted off and flew around the tower, he knew that Silver Soul was watching him, waiting for him, and like the Luminus, Finn felt sure that he would meet her again regardless of his father’s wishes.

THE GLOWING MAN

Rohan crouched down beside the ragged blanket where Denny, one of the missing homeless, had made his bed for the night. Denny's home was a corner in one of the public stables. He was the last person to have gone missing from what they could ascertain from the townsfolk.

Rohan gingerly lifted the filthy bit of cloth and saw that some straw had been put down underneath to add comfort and a little bit of warmth. Something tinkled and rolled away as he shifted the blanket. Rohan reached down and picked the object up. It was a shell that had a little hole drilled into the top and a cord looped through it. It was evidently to be worn as a necklace.

"See!" Janie cried and pointed at the shell.

"See what?" Mayor Wornton asked as he shifted from foot to foot, not liking being in the stables with his fancy black velvet coat.

"Denny got that shell from his late wife. She gave it to him when they were married. He never let it out of his sight. He wouldn't leave it here like this, all abandoned and such!" Janie explained.

Rohan craned his head to look back at her. Her face was pale. Every location they'd gone to, they'd found remnants of people's lives, but not the people. She and the mayor were the only ones that Rohan had allowed to accompany him, Serxio and Leonid in this search. He was glad of that, because he could see the alarm and fear rising in both of them with each stop. Such emotions would have spread through a larger group and then to the town like wildfire during the dry season.

"Any signs of violence, my king?" Leonid asked as he crouched down by Rohan and stirred the straw with one gloved hand.

There was no blood. No ripped clothing, or rather, there were clothes with rips in them, but they didn't appear to be fresh. There were no scuff marks or broken bottles or anything to show that there had been a fight.

"None that I can see. Just like the others." Rohan frowned. "It's like they just walked off of their own free will and never returned."

"If it were just one or even two of the homeless, I might think that they did move on. Drink and drugs and despair can cause a person to do things that they ordinarily wouldn't do," Leonid remarked as he stirred the straw until they could both see bare earth. "But there are too many for that explanation to be reasonable."

"It's not just that, Leonid. Remember what we all said in the woods the other day?" Rohan reminded his Guard captain.

Leonid nodded. "How quiet it was. No wolves. No animals at all. As if something had scared them all away."

"What if *something* has?" Rohan asked slowly. "What if that something ran out of things to prey upon in the forest and--"

“Moved to Dawnmore?” Leonid finished for him. His Guard captain’s mouth flattened. “What are you thinking it might be?”

“I don’t know. But whatever it is must be very clever to target those that few will miss,” Rohan answered as he regarded Denny’s bit of bare earth.

“Looks like Serxio has found a local to charm,” Leonid remarked.

Rohan looked over his shoulder. The mayor and Janie were at the doors of the stables now where Serxio held their horses. They were all three speaking to a girl in a ragged dress who had no shoes. Rohan winced at the state of her feet. He was glad the summer was coming for her sake. Rirea had never been a truly wealthy country, but things had gotten so much worse recently. Yet, there was something in the way this girl held herself that told him she had been loved at one time. She’d had more. Serxio was suddenly turning around and gesturing for Rohan and Leonid to join them.

Both men got up and strode out. Leonid hung back as the girl seemed very small and a little skittish. Her brown eyes went very wide when Rohan introduced himself to her, not as king, but just as “Rohan”. But she knew who he was. Her hands twitched at the front of her soiled dress.

“Now, Hannah, could you tell King Rohan what you told me?” Serxio coaxed. Like with women and men of all sorts, Serxio had managed to charm the young girl and she quickly nodded as if to please the foppish lord.

“My brother,” she whispered softly.

“Your brother?” Rohan prompted.

“Jeremiah,” her voice sounded almost like a benediction when she said his name. “The glowing man took him.”

“Glowing man?” Rohan frowned, but his heart raced a little. Was this a witness to whoever was taking his people?

She nodded. “He takes people into the woods.” She shuddered, “He almost got me, but I didn’t look into his eyes.”

That last line had ice forming in Rohan’s veins. She stuck two fingers into her mouth and sucked on them. He got the feeling that this was an act she’d done as a younger child, but had reverted to it because of some trauma.

“Her brother was guarding their sheep,” Serxio took up the story. “Their parents died last year and it was just the two of them. Well, the sheep had been disappearing. Jeremiah thought it was wolves. Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn’t. But one night he was out guarding them. Hannah couldn’t sleep and she was watching him out of the one window in their home. She saw Jeremiah and some neighbors get into a fight--”

“Bad men,” Hannah said around her fingers.

“Yes, it seems that maybe the neighbors instead of wolves were the problem with the sheep. In any case, a--a *glowing man* emerged from the woods and joined them,” Serxio continued on, putting emphasis on her description of the person. “The neighbors tried to attack him, but he fought them off?”

Serxio made the last sound like a question and the girl answered it, “No, they just stopped. He made them stop.”

Made them stop? Rohan’s forehead furrowed.

“The four of them then started for the house where Hannah was,” Serxio stated. “But she ran away before they got there.”

“Why did you run, Hannah?” Rohan asked.

“Ma and Da were there,” she mumbled. “They were telling me to run. Telling me not to look into the glowing man’s eyes.”

Rohan frowned again. Hadn't Serxio said that her parents were dead? How could they be telling her anything if that was the case? Was she making this up? Perhaps she'd had a nightmare. Or perhaps she'd seen her brother killed by these neighbors and made up the glowing man.

"All in white," she murmured. "White clothes. White hair. But *red* eyes. Red, red eyes."

Rohan jerked. His gaze went up to Serxio's face. The young lord nodded. *That* detail was what had caught his attention, too. Fae had red eyes. And Finn had told him of one particular Fae that had white hair.

Marikoth.

"When she dared to go back to the house the next day, she found it empty," Serxio said. "But there were tracks leading into the woods. She found her brother's knife at the beginning of a winding path. She followed it for awhile, but… but--"

"Saw white," she whispered. "Ran."

"But what does this glowing man in the country have to do with the disappearances here? Of, ah, Denny and the others?" Mayor Wornton asked with a flap of his pudgy arms.

"He was here," Hannah said with startling clarity. Her fingers were out of her mouth now and she was staring into Rohan's eyes with sudden intensity. "I saw him. The glowing man. Denny followed him. Took him to the woods. I ran again."

Rohan felt another chill go through him. The woods. He had an idea of where Marikoth's hidey hole was. In the woods by Hannah's farm. He got her to describe exactly where her old farm was. He, Serxio and Leonid would be heading there next.

Rohan patted her shoulder. "You were right to run." He stood up. "Janie, would you bring Hannah up to the castle? If you could take her to see Cook Shelton. Tell her that Hannah is to be taken care of by order of me."

Janie nodded. "Of course, your majesty."

Hannah blinked hugely as Janie took her hand. "Will the glowing man be able to find me at the castle?"

Rohan shook his head. "No, Hannah. You will be perfectly safe there."

He hoped that was true. Janie and Hannah immediately started off down the road towards the castle. The mayor blinked owlishly at him, unsure of what to do with himself. Rohan stared coldly at the man.

"Mayor, I need you to do a few things. Maybe you will be able to redeem yourself," Rohan told him.

The mayor straightened up so he more resembled a ball balancing on a stump. "I will do whatever you require of me and I will do it post haste!"

"You will ensure that there are no homeless people left outdoors on Dawnmore's streets. You will find safe places for them to bed down and make sure they are provided with food and other necessities. If you have difficulty arranging this, speak with the staff at the castle. They will assist you," Rohan stated. "You will then impose a curfew of 10 p.m."

"What reason should I give?" The mayor had pulled out a notebook and a gold pen. He was jotting down Rohan's orders. "That there is a Fae loose in our city?"

"How do you know the glowing man is a Fae?" Serxio asked curiously.

"The red eyes, of course." The mayor blinked at all of them. "And the use of magic. I mean what else could induce people to simply walk into the woods at night?"

He was quite right of course. But Rohan didn't want to start a panic. He also didn't want to inflame the people against the Fae again. He remembered all too well

hearing about--and seeing himself--how people turned against their friends and neighbors for fear of them having Fae blood and Empire sympathies. That fear had kept Finn enslaved by his stepfamily. He had yet to deal with that issue. He fully intended that when Finn came home he would find himself Lord of Tanglewood Manor as well as Prince of the Eclipse Throne.

"Do not mention any Fae. Merely inform them that there have been disappearances and they should be on the lookout for anything unusual," Rohan said tightly.

The mayor jotted that down and, with a flourish, tapped the pen to paper. "Anything else?"

"Yes, have the Guard start asking around *discreetly* if anyone else has seen our glowing man," Rohan finished.

"It shall be done, your majesty!" The mayor beamed at him as if this willingness to do his job somehow erased the stain of him doing nothing for so long. "And shall I find you at the castle?"

"No, we'll be going to Hannah's farm. You can report your progress to me when I return," Rohan said.

"With pleasure, your majesty!" Mayor Wornton's eyes were practically glowing with the idea of an audience with the king. Rohan was not so sure he would like it, for he was going to make sure that the mayor was truly doing his job.

"Come, Serxio, Leonid! Let us ride!" Rohan cried as he vaulted into the saddle of his horse.

The others followed suit and they rode out of Dawnmore into the farmland that surrounded Rirea. The sky was gray, boiling over with clouds, and caused the fields empty of growing things to look more like fall or winter rather than the beginning of summer. Rohan felt his heart sink as every farm they passed showed this lack of life and skeletal-looking animals. Rohan had been emptying the kingdom's coffers to import grain, rice and other foodstuffs so that there was something to fill his people's bellies. But that could not go on forever. He wondered, too, how many of these farmsteads were empty from people simply abandoning them and which ones were empty because Marikoth had lured the occupants away.

"Do you think that Marikoth drained the land and then when he couldn't take more than that he's been going after the people?" Serxio asked.

The three of them had discussed Hannah's "glowing man" and were all certain that it was the Death Mage.

"It would mean he's been here for years. Since the Wall came up for sure. That's when things started getting bad," Leonid remarked.

"To think he has been here all this time and we did not know. We thought of the enemy as Thalanil when it was his brother," Rohan remarked softly.

"Are you sure that Thalanil isn't also the enemy? He wasn't exactly fond of us when we met," Serxio pointed out.

"I think that is more because of my uncle. They both loved Maeve Ashton. Finn's mother," Rohan explained.

"A love triangle?! Oh, my! That's quite extravagant and romantic!" Serxio looked all agog.

"You mustn't bring it up with Lord De Clare just to satisfy your desire for gossip!" Leonid warned him.

Serxio waved a hand through the air as if that were no matter. "Oh, I wouldn't ask him. I would ask his *servants*. They would know."

Rohan's forehead furrowed but then cleared at that. But he realized that Serxio was right. The servants would know what his uncle was doing better than anyone.

And Serxio could charm it out of them.

"I'd like you to do that, Serxio," Rohan said. "Find out about my uncle's affair and anything else regarding him. That might be the closest we can ever come to the truth. Discreetly, of course."

"Oh, of course!" Serxio looked rapturous.

"You know you're just encouraging him, but I suppose it is for the best this time," Leonid sighed.

Rohan grinned. "We're using Serxio's powers for good."

"I'll find out everything! And Leonid will have to admit that my skills are quite useful," Serxio sniffed.

"Oh, I never said they weren't," Leonid chuckled. "Just that you use them to ferret out gossip and things that don't matter."

"I'll have you know that gossip matters! It's where we find out the truth. Often unwelcome truths," Serxio insisted.

Rohan thought he might be right.

"I think that is Hannah and Jeremiah's old home." Serxio stuck out a hand and pointed towards a one room house that looked more like a shack that had seen better days.

They rode over to it, dismounting when they reached the back door. It was cracked open and Rohan wondered if it had been that way since Hannah escaped from the glowing man. They tied up their horses to a post and then he went to the door.

"I thought we were going into the woods," Serxio said as he regarded the half-open door with far more dread than the dreaded Lupine Woods.

"We are. I just want to see…" Rohan stopped.

He didn't know what he wanted to see. But the truth was that Rohan understood the feeling that was undoubtedly coursing through the young lord. The hair on the back of his neck was standing on end when he pressed his palm against the door, preparing to push it open. Something was here. Or, at least, something had been here.

He unsheathed Lightbringer. The runes glowed hotly. He felt the ones on his forearms burn a little too. They had been mostly drained after his battle with Thalanil, but there was still some power left in them. He wasn't sure if they were reacting to something inside of the house or if it was his own unease. He heard the others unsheath their weapons. Instead of the ridiculously fancy sword that Serxio usually carried with him everywhere for show, Serxio now sported two curved daggers that looked well used and very sharp.

"You are prepared for once," Leonid grunted as he took in the daggers.

"After those damned spiders, I'm always prepared," Serxio answered.

Rohan drew in a breath to center himself. He shoved the door open in one powerful move and stepped inside, Lightbringer prepared to blast anything in its path. But the single room was empty of enemies.

There was a rickety table with two chairs before a hearth that was blackened from use. It was cold and lightless now. The steel pot that hung from a hook over where a fire would have been looked rusty. He imagined that when this house was lived in Hannah and her mother might have done needlework by that fire while a simple stew cooked in the pot. He could almost see the other door opening as Jeremiah and their father had come in from the fields after a long day of tending sheep. The dusty, cobwebbed, wooden bowls that were stacked in a nook by the fire would have been taken down and filled with stew for them. All four members of this family would have tucked into the stew, perhaps with a thick crusty loaf of

bread.

But his imagination failed to conjure more pleasant scenes as he looked at the low, straw beds in the room. There was a larger one in the far corner where the parents likely slept. There was a ragged curtain hung up to separate it from the children's straw piles. For a moment, Rohan imagined the parents in their last days in that bed, struggling to breathe, coughing up blood, staring at the ceiling with mixed hopes that they would either get better or just die. He thought of his own parents' deaths then. He hoped they were quick and not drawn out like Hannah and Jeremiah's parents deaths likely had been.

"That must be the window that Hannah watched her brother out of," Serxio whispered as if afraid to speak too loudly and disturb ghosts.

Leonid grimaced. "This place feels *wrong*. Reminds me of an old battlefield where you can still smell the blood hundreds of years later."

"It's haunted," Rohan agreed.

He stepped over to the window to try and imagine what Hannah saw that night her brother disappeared. He drew in a sharp breath however when he saw that something was freshly carved into the wood where her little hands might have rested. It said: *Hannah, come home.* His fingers moved over that scored wood and splinters rose up from it.

"Someone was just here," Rohan said.

"What?" Leonid asked as he came over.

"Who? Not her brother? Or--or do you think it was… Marikoth?" Serxio gripped his daggers tighter.

Leonid looked down at the carved words. "He makes it seem like it was her brother who wrote this, but it wasn't."

"No. It's not so much a wish as a *threat*," Rohan agreed.

At that moment, something caught his eye out of the window. Rohan's head snapped up. The glass was wavy, making it hard to see things clearly. But he definitely saw a thin figure in brown--*not white*--run across the field and go into the woods.

"Did you see him?" Rohan asked, not waiting for an answer as he ran towards the door that opened up into said field.

"I did! Could it be the brother? Could we be wrong about this?" Leonid asked.

Rohan threw the door open and stepped outside. The figure was gone, but so were Rohan's doubts that Marikoth was involved. For he saw them then. The footprints in the grass. Though the grass was short and brown in places, where the footprints were--made by long, elegant bare feet--the ground was *black*.

It was drained of all life.

Marikoth had been here.

And his tracks led back towards the woods.

FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

Finn still felt like he was flying even though he and Thalanil were seated at the dining room table and were very firmly on the ground. All afternoon, his father had taught him the basics of riding wyverns, but, for once, something in the Fae world had not been hard for him. He had seemed to know what to do before Thalanil had told him to do it. It had been the same when Jacob was teaching him to ride horses. He and the mount were one. Though Lightheart was far different than Sweetfire, Finn had felt just as confident in the saddle.

"You are a natural at this, Finrael!" his father had called from Shadeheart's back.

Finn had hardly had to touch Lightheart's reins to get him to go in the direction he wanted. Not to mention the *speed* Finn wanted. He had leaned over the wyvern's scaly back and urged the beast to ever greater speeds as they flew around the palace.

The wind whipped his hair back from his face and caused his eyes to sting and water, but he loved every second of it. When Lightheart had performed a loop that had Finn gripping his back tightly with his thighs, his father had cried out in alarm, but then laughed when Finn did not lose his seat. When Lightheart and Finn had rejoined him and Shadowheart, Finn had been grinning and his father had been shaking his head, but there had been an indulgent smile on Thalanil's lips.

"And to think I believed we would be doing, at most, a leisurely flight just around the tower as you got used to flying," Thalanil chuckled.

That grin would not leave Finn's face. "Flying is wonderful! More than wonderful!"

"We can fly every day unless we have commitments," Thalanil said.

"Other than learning to read and speak Fae, I--I don't have much to do, Father. I would like to be more useful. What other commitments could I pick up?" Finn asked.

Thalanil's eyebrows lifted, but then he smiled and shook his head. "The staff has told me of your desire to help them. But your focus really should be on your lessons and… and enjoying yourself. After you are officially crowned this mid-summer, there will be certain royal functions you will need to attend to and you should pick a cause that interests you to champion. But, other than that, I want you to have fun." His father's eyes narrowed for a moment. "I do not think you've had much chance to have fun in your life."

Finn looked down and fussed at the reins. He wondered what Thalanil would say if he told him about the one day off a year he'd had, which had just been a half day this year. No, he had not had a lot of fun in his life. But taking care of Tanglewood--if not his stepfather--had been a reward in and of itself. He couldn't

imagine a life of pure leisure, but maybe some more time for himself would be good. He thought of what his father had just said about being *crowned*. That sounded important and a little frightening. He was already having difficulty with people bowing and speaking only when spoken to. Not to mention the "my prince" and "your majesty" that peppered their speech when they spoke to him in Common. This crowned business sounded like there was more of that to come. He blinked and looked up.

"You said *crowned.* What does that mean exactly?" Finn asked.

A look of confusion crossed Thalanil's handsome face. "Why… Finrael, you must be introduced to the Empire as the prince! It will be a whole year's celebration for the people to honor you. There will be dancing and feasts and much joy."

Finn blinked. He would be at the center of a huge celebration that lasted a *year*? People would be *honoring* him?

"I would be the cause of all that? Me?" Finn sounded a little strangled.

But he should have known that being a prince would entail more than him lurking in the palace and trying not to be noticed.

Thalanil let out a laugh. "Oh, Finrael, you… you really do not know, do you?"

"Don't know what?"

"How important you are!"

Finn shook his head. "*You* are important, Father. I'm just…" He didn't say it, but he thought it, *your illegitimate son with a human woman whom I killed.*

His father looked at him fondly. "You are the *prince*, my son. You are important in your own right. We, Fae, have few children. It is the cost of immortality. Every child is sacred. And you--you are of the most royal line so everyone will celebrate your life."

"But won't people want to know… who my mother is? I mean you loved her, but--"

"They know who Maeve Ashton is… *was*." His father swallowed tightly. "I should have married her. Made her the queen no matter what convention said. She was already that in my heart. It was a terrible mistake. One of many, it seems."

His father's gaze was on the horizon now. Finn wondered what he imagined he saw there.

"Was it because she was human that you didn't marry her?" Finn asked, adjusting his hands on the reins as Lightheart and Shadeheart hovered easily above the forest.

His father nodded. "I am so ashamed of that. I was a fool."

"Isn't crowning me going to cause the same amount of trouble then?" Finn guessed.

His father focused on him again. "You are my son. You are the Empire's prince. There is no amount of trouble too great that I would not go through for you, Finrael."

Finn looked down, not used to being so *treasured*. "I will do my best to be worthy of that."

"You already are," Thalanil assured him.

They'd flown for hours after that until the sun dipped below the horizon and the Wall went completely black for a moment. Points of light from the city of Dawnmore had pierced the black Wall.

Rohan is by one of those lights, Finn thought.

And he remembered the Luminus. The day had been wonderful. More than wonderful. Only those few weeks with Rohan exceeded it. He did not want to

betray his father's trust. But Thalanil was being unreasonable with what he was asking of Finn. And Finn was certain that if Thalanil would put aside the anger he still bore the De Clare family and see Rohan as an individual, he would admire the Rirean king, too. Finn just had to figure out a way to make that happen. The first step, though, was getting in communication with Rohan, and the Luminus was that way.

They landed just as the sun kissed the land goodbye and full dark fell. As he was dismounting, Finn's gaze had swung, just for a moment, to the chained lair where Silver Soul lived. Her mercury-colored eyes glowed as she watched them. There was no raven pecking at the top of her lair any longer, but Finn could still feel her powerful pull. There was a connection between them.

Maybe she hates me because she knows--just like Shadeheart did--that I'm a Death Mage like Marikoth, Finn thought. *Marikoth killed the queen, Silver Soul's rider. Yes, she must hate me. That's the only explanation...*

His father had thrown an arm around him and broke Finn's concentration on the wyvern queen. Thalanil was smiling and easy. Flying, evidently, put him in the best of moods.

"We have certainly earned our dinner, Finrael!" His father led him towards the stairs. "I am starving. I am sure you are, too."

And what a dinner it was! The long table groaned with food. There was roast chicken with crispy skin. A ham studded with anise and glistening with a sweet glaze. A haunch of beef dusted with salt, pepper and rosemary. Potatoes in all forms from mashed, heaped with butter and cream, to fried in hot oil. Salads with tart vinaigrettes or cream dressings and any kind of vegetable imaginable sat next to baskets of bread of all different kinds. Freshly baked rolls. Crusty long narrow baguettes. From ones flavored with herbs and seeds to others as light as air.

As hard as it was to find room on his plate for all the food he wanted, Finn had enough stemware to accommodate his thirst. He had three wine glasses with one for red, another for white and a third for champagne. He also had a water glass and yet another mug for the cold, fizzing juices that he loved.

His father was right that he was famished after the ride, but still this much food seemed decadent and rather wasteful for two people. Or it would have, if he did not know that all food that they did not eat was given to the servants as a supplement to their own meals or donated to the needy. Nothing was ever left over. So Finn consoled himself that even if he couldn't fit yet another mouthful of ham or chicken or beef between his lips, it would be put to good use.

In addition to quelling his hunger, the delicious meal was also making the laborious task of learning Fae a little easier. His father had taken over teaching him the basics from Lord Camrys that evening.

"I doubt you are an indifferent student, Finrael. I think you just need a different instructor for these beginning parts," his father had said warmly.

"You didn't dismiss Lord Camrys did you?" Finn had found Camrys a bit boring, but he hadn't wanted him to lose his position!

I should not have snuck off with Tyreon! Even though his pups and mate were sweet! I should have thought about the fact that Lord Camrys would get in trouble! Finn thought.

"Of course not. He shall be back tomorrow, but I will be supplementing what he's teaching you," his father assured him.

"Oh, that's a relief."

"You think of me as a… a tyrant?" His father's eyebrows lifted.

Finn blinked. "What? No! Just… no! I…" He dithered into silence.

“Someone who wasn’t doing a good job teaching you would be dismissed, Finrael. That is only fair. But I think we will give the good lord one more chance now that he knows your… level of learning--”

“Level zero. I am definitely on level zero,” Finn said.

Thalanil chuckled and shook his head. “You are too hard on yourself. I believe you shall learn something tonight while we eat. I am betting on it.”

And, in fact, he had. In contrast to Lord Camrys, his father had made learning Fae fun. Instead of simply having Finn conjugate verbs such as “I walk”, “he walks”, “they walk”, etcetera, his father would conjure a magical little figure that would perform the action that Finn was learning. It made the words stick better in his mind as he pictured his father’s magical men every time he said the words.

Sliding a piece of bread through the unctuous beef gravy, Finn couldn’t help himself from asking, “Will I be able to do things like that with my magic? Make those little creatures like you do?”

“I do not see why not. Magic is about what we will. It is only limited by the strength of that will and the amount of innate power we possess.” His father did not still in his cutting of meat off a chicken leg as he made that answer so Finn was encouraged to go on and ask more. He was still leery about talking about magic.

“Or, in my case, the amount of power I drain from other… things?” Finn asked, casting his voice low.

There were two servants in the far corners of the room. They stood there like statues, but they very much were live men and Finn knew better than anyone that servants hear everything. His father’s eyes flickered to them. With a brief smile, he spoke in Fae to them, his words liquid and not halting like Finn’s, and the two men left the room. Only once they were alone did either he or Thalanil speak again.

“You should not speak so openly about your… your gift,” his father said.

“So we’re going to hide the fact that I’m a Death Mage?” Finn point blank asked.

His father’s utensils made a sharp *clack* as he set them down on his plate. “You are *not* a Death Mage. You are simply a *Mage*. Just like any other Fae who wields magic except, of course, you are more powerful due to your lineage.”

Finn actually liked the idea of just being called a Mage. It opened up possibilities that perhaps he could use magic in ways that were not destructive unlike Marikoth. But he didn’t want to ignore the fact that his magic worked differently from his father’s. Finn put down the remnant of bread and laced his fingers together in front of him as he regarded his father. Thalanil was staring at his plate as if it had the answers to the universe written upon it under the chicken leg and mashed potatoes.

“Do you know if… if Marikoth could drain the land of life like I described Rirea to be?” Finn asked.

His father’s hands fisted for a moment, but then he consciously relaxed them. “I do not know. Those *aspects* of magic are not taught to anyone.”

“Why?”

His father grimaced. “The reason does not matter. It is just a lost… art.”

“But it *does* matter. It must.” Finn licked his lips. “You would tell me--”

“People are afraid of what they do not understand.” Thalanil reached over and covered Finn’s hands with his. “And when they are afraid, they behave badly. Strike out. Do terrible things. Believe terrible things. Death Magic causes such a reaction so… so it is not talked about and not taught.”

Finn imagined Marikoth facing this same *blank* of information on the gift he had. He didn’t think that his uncle would accept such an answer. He would look for

knowledge and he would find it. He *had* found it. But it hadn't led to a good place. So should Finn just accept his father's words and let this go?

"Why was Marikoth exiled?" Finn found himself asking. "Did he hurt someone?"

Thalanil nodded slowly. "Our--our mother. It was not intentional."

"Like what I did to… to mine?" Finn's voice was small.

His mind flashed back to an image of his mother--wasted and sickly--in her bed. He had done that. He had not meant to. He'd had no idea it was possible, let alone that he was the cause of it. Yet she had died because of him. And she'd loved him so much that she hadn't protected herself from him. She'd known what was happening to her. She'd given her life to him.

"Yes." Another nod and swallow. "But he was much older than you when it happened. Not quite considered a full adult in Fae terms, but not a child of five as you were."

"But if Marikoth hurt her accidentally or didn't even know he had, like me, then why… why was he sent away?"

Marikoth's bitterness about this could not be forgotten. It was almost a madness within him. Finn couldn't imagine Thalanil allowing Marikoth to be banished for a simple mistake. He had forgiven Finn for killing the love of his life. More than forgiven. He had embraced Finn fully. Wouldn't he have done so for an older brother?

But maybe it wasn't his choice. Maybe that choice was made without him being involved at all, Finn thought.

Thalanil's hand tightened over his. "Marikoth is not you. What happened with him will not happen with you. So you need not fear his fate."

Finn frowned. His father was avoiding answering the question. "It's just… I have so many questions about this power inside of me." For a moment, he thought he saw the flutter of wings out of the corner of his eye, but he didn't turn his head to see if the raven was there. "I have so many *fears*. Knowledge… knowledge makes fear go away. Is there no one who could tell me more of Death Magic?"

"No."

"Ryleth knows something. I told you about her," Finn pointed out. "She disappeared after we met, but perhaps I could go look for her in the city. She might still be here or nearby and--"

"There is no need for her. You should not think about Death Magic, let alone learn it. I will teach you magic the *right* way. You will never need to use that--that aspect of your powers," Thalanil told him and Finn could tell that his father would not answer anything more on this topic. Thalanil tapped the primer on the table between them. "Now, let us learn some more words before dessert comes."

The rest of the meal was pleasant enough, but Finn could tell his father was disturbed by his questions and maybe the memories they brought up of Marikoth. Finn, for his part, couldn't let go of the secrets his father was clearly hiding from him. And deep within himself, Finn knew that his father was *wrong*. Death Magic was a part of him. It was the basis of his magic. He could no more ignore it than he could his own heart.

After dinner, his father had claimed exhaustion and urged Finn to go to bed as well. He would continue his reading lessons in the morning, bright and early, with Lord Camrys as Thalanil had meetings, but he would quiz Finn that afternoon.

"We can go flying again if you wish," his father had offered.

Finn nodded eagerly and had headed to his room, but the moment he was out of his father's sight, he had stopped. His fingers curled against his palms.

Now would be a good time to use the Luminus, Finn thought.

He immediately felt guilty. But, again, he reminded himself that Thalanil was not being fair. Fear and anger were clouding his father's mind. Should he obey someone whose commands were not rational? It still did not sit right with him, but he knew he was going to do this anyway.

What if I can help save Rirea? Can I really feast and fly and learn my lessons while others are suffering and dying? No. No, I can't. Father is wrong in this. For both our sakes, and the people of Rirea, I must do this.

Finn cast up and down the hallway, trying to think how to get to the tower. They had only accessed the wyvern tower through the gardens so he wasn't sure how to get there from the inside of the palace. He was just about to head to the gardens to retrace their steps when there was a *caw!*

His head jerked up. The raven was perched on a family portrait. From the line of the sitter's jaw and something about the eyes, he could definitely see the familial resemblance. His father had explained that as Fae did not die--except for in battle or terrible circumstance--the crown was passed from one member of the family to another based upon the will of the gods. He did not explain exactly what that meant. But, for the most part, the king or queen and their immediate family were the only Ravenspars to remain at the palaces so as to confirm in the mind of the populace that this new Ravenspar was the true ruler and not the past one. So Finn had plenty of family spread around the Empire--family that Finn would meet--when he was formally crowned prince at the mid-summer festival. But the raven did not seemingly perch there to draw his attention to this family member. It was just a convenient perch.

"Will you take me to the Luminus?" Finn asked the creature.

The raven *cawed* then took off down the hallway with Finn racing after it.

THE UNDEAD

They left the horses at Hannah and Jeremiah's old house. Stealth was not something one could do on a horse easily. And none of the horses liked the woods. Once again, Rohan mourned Tempest and hoped that the great stallion was keeping Finn company and eating the sweetest of grass in the Empire.

"Is it going to rain?" Serxio asked as he ducked under a hanging branch that had not been there moments before.

Like the woods in the Empire, it always seemed that the Lupine Woods were antagonistic to people too. The pathway they were on was clear enough, but it seemed that branches suddenly whipped out to block their way or catch in their cloaks. Rohan wondered if the woods were protecting Marikoth, or urging them to go back.

"No," Leonid answered quietly. None of them dared speak loudly, not just for fear of being overheard, but because there was a hush in the forest that day that was unnerving all three of them. "Those aren't rain clouds. We should be fine."

"Oh," Serxio sounded a little depressed about that.

He likely wanted to have an excuse not to follow Marikoth's footsteps deeper into the woods. Rohan thought about sending him back. Serxio was not really a fighter and he might do something foolish like try and give his life to save Rohan's.

We are up against a Fae who has Death Magic. What use will blades or bolts be against him in any case? Rohan wondered.

He still had Lightbringer unsheathed. The runes glittered, but did not shine as brightly as before. Rohan had a sense though that it was not because the sword was low on power, but that it was cloaking itself as they neared their foe.

The path they followed was muddy so Marikoth's footprints did not leave dead spots, but Marikoth and people with boots on their feet had come through here not that long ago. From the freshness of the marks Rohan could tell that they were on the right track. He kept lifting his head to scan the places between the trees ahead of them before dropping his gaze back down, but he saw no one and no sign of a camp.

"Does anyone fear that we're heading into a trap?" Serxio asked after making a "gah" sound as his boot stuck in mud almost up to his ankle. "Blasted forest and--"

"And you were going to spend the night in it with your sign," Leonid chuckled. "But you can't take a bit of mud?"

"The road is *not* the woods, Leonid. You really should learn to differentiate places on a map," Serxio sniffed. "But as I was saying, before being insulted, was that… don't you think these footprints are a bit… well, *obvious*?"

Rohan had been thinking the same thing.

“Well, they have to leave some footmarks as they can’t levitate,” Leonid argued, but his tone was not one of confidence. Instead, he sounded like he was trying to convince himself. “The farm is not exactly in the thick of things. How many abandoned homes did we see on the way here? Who would see the footprints but us? And we were looking for them while others would just think they’re from hunters or some such.”

“True, but one would think a powerful Mage such as Marikoth would be able to hide himself and his minions better than this,” Serxio pointed out. “Look how powerful Thalanil is. I don’t think *he* would leave footprints leading right to his secret camp.”

“I believe you are right, Serxio. Though you do have points, too, Leonid,” Rohan finally said as the other two mulled over which Fae brother was more powerful. “But we don’t have much choice, do we? We have to follow them.”

“No, you’re right at that, your majesty. But maybe Serxio and I should go first instead of you?” Leonid suggested.

Rohan was in the lead. He let out a dry laugh. “Your bravery and loyalty to me is without question. But I am the only one who has magic. Hannah told us that Marikoth was able to overcome three people all at once without fighting them. We’ll need Lightbringer to be front and center.”

“Yeah, how do you suppose he did that?” Leonid asked, sounding slightly unnerved. His stout Guard captain would face anything without fear, but magic that he had no ability to fight against caused him pause.

“Maybe Marikoth did to them what Finn did to Tela when we met you on the road, remember, Leonid? He had her so she couldn’t move,” Serxio said, sounding almost fond of the memory. In a way, their time in the Empire had been happy once Finn had healed himself and they’d stopped being prisoners.

“Perhaps, but one would think if Marikoth just controlled their bodies then Jeremiah would have at least called out to his sister and told her to run,” Rohan said.

“True,” Serxio agreed, a small frown gracing his lips.

“Something else is wrong about these tracks now that I’m looking at them carefully,” Leonid remarked. “Well, I mean it looks like one of the people was dragging their left foot. That would be a damned painful injury, but it appears like they were moving at a fair pace from the length of the tracks.”

Rohan noticed that now as well. “That is disturbing. Perhaps they had gotten free of Marikoth and were running from him?”

“That can’t be. Some of the boot marks are on top of the barefoot ones,” Leonid said. “So Marikoth must have been *ahead* of them. They’d be running right towards him.”

“Maybe they got turned around,” Serxio suggested. “The woods look all the same when you’re in a rush. Even when you’re not.”

Leonid let out a grunt of agreement. But a further trickle of unease went through Rohan. He was so deep into considering what this meant that it was Serxio who alerted him of danger ahead.

“There’s someone there! They’re hiding behind a tree!” Serxio hissed.

Serxio’s right hand shot out to point to a larger tree trunk about twenty feet ahead of them. All three of them froze. They barely dared to breathe. The tree marked the end of the narrow path. It appeared the ground opened up after that for a little ways. The person was only half hidden by the tree. They appeared to be… *swaying*. Rohan swallowed down bitter saliva that flooded his mouth. He made gestures to the others to follow his lead.

Rohan crouched low and headed off the path. He wanted to come around to the other side of this person and catch them off guard, which wouldn't happen if they followed the path. The ground was muddier here than on the path. His toes tingled unpleasantly as water seeped into his boots and the toxins from the weeping trees that had been washed into the ground touched his skin. They would have to win this battle quickly to avoid being sickened. Rohan grimaced.

He picked his way carefully between tree trunks. His gaze was fixed upon the half of the swaying person that came into view. As they got closer, Rohan began to pick out additional things that were strange about this person other than the mindless swaying. For one thing, it appeared that they had on only one boot. The tingling of his skin from Rohan's attenuated contact with the poison was uncomfortable, but full on bare feet in the Lupine Woods was madness. This person should have been in agony from having their bare foot in the muck. He assumed that Marikoth was somehow immune to the poison, but this person was not him. Based upon Finn's description, they were not tall enough for one thing and there was no hint of the long, white hair. They had short dark hair, the same color as Hannah's.

Is that Jeremiah? Rohan thought with a touch of horror. *Perhaps his mind has been affected by the poison and that is why he just sways instead of making his way back to the house.*

They were now but ten feet from the boy and the clearing itself. Leonid tapped Rohan on the right shoulder and then pointed. There were *two* more figures in the clearing. One was a big man, probably leaning towards fat in days of plenty, and a leaner, whippet-thin man. Both, like Jeremiah, were standing in front of trees with their backs towards Rohan and the others *swaying*. These were not tall, lithe figures with long white hair, however, so Marikoth was *not* there.

Rohan noted a few other things in the clearing. There was a neat fire in a stone-lined pit with a pot above it. Something was bubbling inside, though the smell was more herbaceous than meaty. There was a rather elaborate desk with a chair in front of it. Quill pens and several books were stacked on the desk. One of the books was spread open. He was too far away to see what it said, but he guessed it was about magic. To Rohan, it appeared clear that a Mage was studying here.

There was also a camp bed with violet bedding beneath a swath of fabric. The fabric was hung from the trees. Everything looked remarkably dry. Perhaps there was some kind of magical umbrella that kept the rain off. Overall, the clearing might have been *cozy* except for the fact that it was in the Lupine Woods and that there were these silent, swaying people with their faces practically pressed against the tree trunks.

Leonid whispered. "There's only the three of them. And they look a little worse for wear. I'm betting we can take them."

"But aren't these, at least, some of the people that Marikoth kidnapped and we thought he--he drained?" Serxio asked. "I'm betting that Hannah's brother is the one nearest to us and those two, I think, are the neighbors who were stealing their sheep."

"You could be right, Serxio. I thought the same myself," Rohan whispered back. He frowned deeply. "Where are the others? I mean why keep these three alive…"

He said nothing more as he had no answers to those questions. He supposed they would find out why these three had been spared while the others were gone in due time.

"So they aren't our enemies, right? We shouldn't attack them, should we?" Serxio pressed.

Leonid sighed. “No, Serxio, we just need to make them think we’ll stick them with the pointy ends of our weapons if they do anything rash against us before we establish that friendship and all.”

“Can you imagine what it must have been like being out here for days and days?” Serxio asked them. “These people are, undoubtedly, traumatized by it, let alone whatever Marikoth did to them.”

“Good point, Serxio. But I still think Leonid is right. We’ll establish that we can use force against them, but we won’t unless we absolutely have to,” Rohan stated. “Now we need to split up and get into position. Serxio, you get nearest Jeremiah. Leonid, take the thin one and I’ll--”

“Take the biggest of all three?” Leonid let his head fall back to look up at the sky as if seeking answers from the gods about what to do with willful kings.

Rohan smiled. “Yes, while I take the big one. Don’t move until I say. Agreed?”

The other two nodded.

Serxio crept nearer to Jeremiah, but kept out of sight while he and Leonid snuck around the edge of the clearing towards the other two swayers. Only when all three of them were in position did Rohan give the order to move.

“NOW!” Rohan shouted as he burst out of the woods to the side of the biggest man.

Lightbringer burned as hot as the sun. Whether it recognized an enemy or simply responded to his own feelings, Rohan did not know. But none of the three men he, Serxio and Leonid had weapons pointed at reacted in any way to their presence. They didn’t move other than to continue swaying. Had they not heard his cry? But that was impossible unless Marikoth had deafened them. But surely they saw the three of them unless they were blinded as well. Rohan blinked in confusion.

“That is your king!” Leonid cried, gesturing to Rohan. “Identify yourselves!”

But none of the figures spoke. They continued to sway while they faced their individual trees.

“I dare say this is awkward. What do we do? They don’t seem to care whether we poke them with our swords or not,” Serxio pointed out.

“Who are you? Are you ill? Did Marikoth--the Fae--do something to you?” Rohan asked.

He lowered Lightbringer and touched the big man’s nearest arm. He snatched his hand back immediately. The man’s flesh had been *cold* like a slab of beef on ice. But then, slowly, terribly slowly, the big man in front of Rohan turned towards him. All the saliva in Rohan’s mouth dried up.

“Oh, by the gods!” Serxio cried as the young man had also turned towards him as well.

“This can’t be!” Leonid echoed as he, too, saw what both Serxio and Rohan did in the man he had accosted.

Their eyes were solid white. Their skin was the color of parchment. Their veins showed through that pale skin as black and green lines as the blood had rotted and coagulated inside of them. The skin on the tips of their fingers was ripped away and bone was exposed. But the men showed no pain. Because they felt no pain. Rohan knew death when he saw it. And these men were *dead*. Yet this was death that mimicked life.

The big man’s mouth opened, showing a shriveled black tongue and sharpened teeth. With a snarl, he lunged towards Rohan.

The battle with the undead had begun.

TALK TO ME

The raven flew soundlessly down Aymar's halls. There were none of the mushrooms that glowed in the garden to create illumination, but there were globes of light that bobbed along the ceiling of the hallway leaving pools of light below them. As the raven flew from pool to pool, the light caught in its wings causing them to shimmer.

Finn almost felt like he was flying himself as he followed after the bird. His booted feet moved soundlessly over the crimson runners on the floors. He leaped over the bare stone so as not to cause a sound. He didn't want to be caught by anyone in a part of the palace where he should not be. Though, he supposed, as prince, he was allowed to be in *any* part of the palace unless King Thalanil stated it was off limits. But being seen in a place where he was unexpected might get back to his father and then Finn would have to decide whether to lie to the Fae king or not. The thought of lying to Thalanil made him feel queasy. His father had been completely loving towards him. He had only denied Finn access to Rirea and those he cared for there.

And that is wrong, Finn reminded himself. *He will not listen to reason. It is not right that he would ask me to abandon the kingdom that was my home and the people I love without a word. His pain over Mother clouds his judgment, I think.*

But he still felt guilty despite this rationalization, yet he didn't turn back.

Every hallway the raven led him through was more beautiful than the last. There were gorgeous oil paintings and elaborate, jewel-toned tapestries on the walls. They showed more portraits of ancestors, illustrations of hunts and feasts, and triumphs after war. In one tapestry he saw a raven--much like the one he followed--soaring over a battle-reddened sky. He tried to slow down to take a closer look at it, but the real raven kept flying and so he had to keep moving. But still, it stuck with him.

Marikoth had recognized this raven, or rather the being that this raven represented. So Finn was not the only Ravenspar to have seen it. Maybe there was information about it somewhere in the palace. He knew there was a library. He should look in there. But that would have to wait. The raven kept flying and so did he. In addition to the paintings and tapestries, he passed by marble statues of creatures he had never even imagined with wings and tails and intelligent eyes. And all was illuminated by golden globes of light that bobbed above them.

Magic, Finn thought with awe.

He had been taught to fear magic. To see it as a sign of evil in that it meant Fae blood. It was dangerous to use it and just as dangerous to admire it. But here, he felt his heart lifting at every common use of it. Did the Fae know how lucky they were to have magic illuminate the darkness and keep them safe? He doubted it. Things that were commonplace became almost invisible in terms of gratefulness. As hard as it had been being a servant in his stepfamily's house, he knew that he would

never take for granted his life now as prince because of it and that made him glad.

A servant crossed ahead of him in the hall. Finn skidded to a halt. He was like a deer caught in a hunter's trap. The man had only to turn his head and he would see Finn standing there.

He'll just bow and move to the side as they always do, Finn thought. But sweat dotted his brow. *He won't question me. And if this gets back to Father, I'll just say I was looking around the palace. That is something I wish to do in any case.*

But just down the hall, five feet away, was a deep cabinet that held beautiful pieces of glass. Finn darted to the side of it. It was deep enough to completely block the servant's view of him if he were to glance up.

Finn strained his hearing for soft footfalls on the carpet to see if the servant intended to come towards him or go in another direction. He waited for minutes that felt like hours. No one passed by. Finn chanced to duck out and looked down the hall. The servant's back was fast retreating into the distance.

Finn let out a sigh of relief. The raven--who had perched atop the cabinet--let out a *caw* and took flight again. There were just two more hallways until they reached a place that Finn recognized: the base of the tower and the winding steps that led up to the Luminus. Finn took the steps two at a time with the raven keeping pace until they reached the door of the room where the Luminus was kept. The raven glided inside while Finn paused on the threshold.

The interior of the room was lit by the Luminus itself. He now knew how it got its name. It let out a silvery light which was a mixture of moonlight and starlight. Finn was drawn to it like a moth to a flame. He stepped inside and closed the door behind him. When he turned around he found the raven sitting on top of the crystal ball portion of the Luminus again. It was illuminated from below and its shadow spanned the ceiling and walls making it look as large as it had in his death dream with Marikoth.

"What are you?" Finn asked the raven with a trace of reverence in his voice.

The raven did not answer.

"*Who* are you?" Finn changed the question, hoping that this might encourage a response.

The raven cocked its head so that its blue-white, left eye was focused on him.

"Are you some kind of familiar?" Finn struggled to find the right word.

The raven gave out an angry *caw*!

"All right. All right." Finn held up his hands as if in surrender. "You're not a familiar. So what is our connection? I trust you. Or perhaps I feel compelled to follow you. Marikoth seemed to know you."

The raven said nothing.

Finn reached out slowly to try and touch the raven. The bird grew very still as his fingers nearly brushed its feathers, but then it hopped away from him, not playing coy, but clearly indicating it did not wish to be touched. Finn lowered his hands.

"It's okay. I will not touch you. I would never… never hurt you," Finn confessed awkwardly.

The raven did not give a *caw* of laughter, but Finn got the distinct impression that the raven found the idea that Finn *could* hurt it quite ridiculous.

"Fine. Have it your way. Continue to be mysterious. See if I care." Finn shook his head and focused his attention on the Luminus instead.

He ignored the raven when it hopped closer to him again as if daring him to try and pet its glossy feathers once more. He would not fall for that trick. But he soon forgot about the bird and everything else as he stared into the Luminus' depths.

Beyond the glow, he thought he could see shapes shifting blurrily, but he could not make them out. His father had not shown him how to use the Luminus, but Thalanil's insistence that he not touch it led him to do exactly that. He placed his fingertips on the cool glass.

He must have done something right, because the images in the glass globe whirled sickeningly. His stomach fell into his feet and then jumped up into his throat. He thought he would fall over but then the images resolved into crystal clearness. Finn let out a breath. His wobbling legs stilled beneath him as he recognized the room he was seeing in the globe. It was Miles' bedroom!

And more than that… he could see *Miles*.

"Miles? Miles, can you hear me?" Finn asked.

Miles, who had been moping on his bed, suddenly came to attention like a rat terrier. His head swiveled right then left. He was clearly looking for Finn to be right there physically with him.

"Finn? Is that--that *you*?" Miles asked tentatively, one of his hands lifting to the collar of his tunic.

"It's me!" Finn had never been so happy to see Miles in his life. "Go to the Luminus! You should be able to see me."

Miles frowned. "L-Luminus? What's that?"

"The crystal ball-like thing," Finn explained with only a touch of annoyance.

Miles' head jerked towards the Luminus. His rather dopey face lit up as he saw Finn. He slid off the bed and hurried towards the Luminus. He touched the crystal ball and, for a moment, his face was obscured from Finn and all that Finn could see were his hands.

"Lower your hands, Miles," Finn instructed as patiently as he could.

His stepbrother did what he asked for once. "Finn! Finn! I can't believe it's *you*! We thought you were dead! And Father was so angry and--"

"You thought I was dead?"

Miles nodded and tugged at the collar of his tunic again. "Yes! Magna, Emmott and Jacob wanted to have a funeral and all that. Even Christopher thought we should do something. But Father reminded everyone that it would be unseemly for us to do so much for a *servant*, you know. So… well, we didn't do anything really. Maybe the servants did, but the family didn't."

Finn's horror and sadness at the thought of people he cared for, believing he was dead and gone, was replaced by a flare of anger and hurt. He felt his cheeks burn with it and that flame inside of him ignited as it did before he used his magic. He swallowed it down. He'd known intellectually, of course, that his stepfather did not truly care for him. That he was a useful *tool*, like a spade or a hammer or something like that. But hearing that he didn't even have a small ceremony to mark his alleged passing just showed how little they cared for him.

"I see," Finn's voice was cold.

Miles blinked at him. Finn thought that his stepbrother read the raw anger on his face, but instead, Miles remarked, "You are dressed rather nicely! What are you wearing? That looks like it's embroidered with silver wire and, I dare say, that is the finest silk I've ever seen!"

"I wouldn't know," Finn answered him coldly. "My father had countless clothes like this for me made up."

"Your f-father?! But isn't he a Fae?" Miles gasped and clutched the top of his tunic now in terror.

Finn though ignored Miles' fright and pushed his own anger to the side. Mentioning Thalanil, even in passing, had him remembering that he wasn't

supposed to be here using the Luminus and talking to Miles. He needed to get the Luminus to Reave Castle and into Rohan's hands.

"Miles, don't worry about that. I need you to get Magna--"

"I can't!" Miles gulped.

"Are you honestly telling me you won't walk down to the kitchens to get her for me after everything I've done for you?" Finn couldn't help the outrage in his voice.

Miles sniffed. "You did things for me because you are our servant and--"

"Your family blackmailed me! And I loved you like a fool so I stayed and…" Finn clamped his lips together. This was not useful. He needed Magna. "Miles, please, I need her help."

"Well, I can't get her for you because I don't know where she is!" Miles crossed his arms over his chest. He seemed more high-strung than usual. But Finn couldn't be bothered right then to ask what was wrong.

"She's likely somewhere on the estate. In the garden perhaps. Or with Daisy. Ask Emmott or Jacob. They'll know where she is," Finn tried to be patient.

"I can't ask them either!" Miles sounded shrill now.

Finn frowned. "Why can't you?"

"Because they're not here! Not on the estate any longer!" Miles held himself more tightly as if the loss of these people mattered to him, but Finn was pretty sure it was simply because he didn't have servants tying his shoes for him.

"What do you mean?" Finn felt a cold chill go through him. "Why aren't they on the estate? They'd never leave willingly."

"Well, they did! I mean… sort of." Miles sniffed and looked ready to cry. "After we wouldn't give you a big funeral Magna spoke back to Father. She yelled at him. Jacob and Emmott backed her up. It was awful! Father was so angry."

The repetition about his stepfather's anger had another cold chill going through Finn. He knew full well how dangerous that temper could be. The skin between his shoulder blades tensed as he remembered the blows from his stepfather's riding crop across his flesh.

"And then what happened?" Finn asked through numb lips.

Please, by the gods, let him not have hurt them! Finn prayed.

The raven hopped up and down and let out a *caw* as if answering his unsaid prayer. But Finn ignored it. He had to know if Magna, Emmott and Jacob were all right.

"He sacked them!" Miles moaned. "And then they said he couldn't sack them as he wasn't the true lord of Tanglewood!"

Finn groaned even as he also cheered to think of Magna saying that. He could hear her shouting that at his stepfather.

"And then?" Finn prompted.

"Father ran them off. He went after them with his riding crop and… well, Jacob wouldn't let him hurt the other two. He took the blows for them so they had a chance to get away," Miles explained and he sounded a little awed at Jacob for doing that.

The flame in Finn's chest burned brighter. If he had his stepfather before him right now, he wasn't sure what he would do. But if he did drain him to the dregs, somehow Finn didn't think he'd mourn the man. Nor would anyone else.

"Then they all left the estate and I don't know where they've gone! Probably to serve in some other household! Though if it gets around that they talk back, they might not get any more work!" Miles flapped his arms by his sides. "Father hasn't hired anyone new. I don't think he intends to. I think he was looking for a reason to get rid of the servants as… well, things are so expensive, you know?"

Finn gritted his teeth and counted to ten so as not to shout at Miles that Tanglewood was Magna, Emmott and Jacob's *home* much more than it was Miles'. But that again wouldn't get him what he wanted. Which was what? If those three weren't there, who could he trust to get the Luminus to Rohan? Not Miles. He wouldn't have the strength to get it out on his own. There was only one more person left.

Christopher.

"Oh, *him*… well, there's an issue with him too," Miles said, his voice going small.

Finn hadn't realized he'd spoken his other stepbrother's name out loud. Seeing Miles' guilty expression Finn frowned deeply.

"What's wrong with Christopher? Is he ill? He's not gone, too, is he?" Finn asked.

"No, not gone. Father likely won't ever let him leave the house again on his own," Miles answered with a grimace.

"What are you talking about?" Finn asked.

"When we came back that day without--without you… well, Father was very angry," Miles paused.

Finn shut his eyes. Those four words were like the drumbeats of the apocalypse. "And?"

"He blamed Christopher for losing you." Miles was flapping his arms again rather like a bird that couldn't take flight. The raven looked at his stepbrother with mild disgust as if he were a poorer human than bird. "And then we lost the servants so…"

"Your father made Christopher a servant?" Finn asked weakly.

"Not a servant. Something lesser than that. He doesn't get paid. No days off. Father took everything from him. All his science things that he cares so much about and his clothes!" Miles cried as if the clothes were the important thing. "He made Christopher watch as he sold all of it!"

Finn felt a stab of sorrow for Christopher. His eldest stepbrother was not kind, but he wasn't vacant like Miles. He cared about science. He didn't want to live his stepfather's fantasy of wealth and power in order to make himself feel important. He wanted those things in order to do more science. To be respected. And Lord Gerard Steward had taken everything away, even the fantasy of it.

"I need you to go get Christopher, Miles. Bring him here. He'd be able to do what I need," Finn said.

Miles' mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. "But--but I can't! Father will get angry and--oh! I should bring Father here to see you're alive and then--"

"NO!" Finn roared.

He said it in a voice that was pure command, not one he had ever used on Miles. His stepbrother went white and retreated a step.

"Are you--are you *really* Finn? I mean… how are you in this glass ball? I didn't even ask that and--"

"It's called a Luminus. It's a magical Fae object. It's how my parents communicated when they weren't together. Now, Miles," Finn was struggling to speak kindly to his stepbrother, "I need you to get Christopher. *Please*."

Miles twitched and his eyes flickered from the Luminus to the door of his bedroom. It was clear he was wondering if he should *tell* Finn he was getting Christopher, but get his father instead. Finally, Miles' shoulders slumped.

"Father is sleeping so I suppose it would be all right," Miles said weakly.

From the light coming in Miles' window, it looked to still be day in Rirea, though it was a gloomy, overcast day. "Why is he sleeping now?"

Miles' shoulders slumped forward more. "He's been… drinking a lot of late."

Finn swallowed. His stepfather had been drunk often right after his mother had died. When drunk, his temper was more volatile than ever. He'd beaten a stray dog to death and that had snapped him out of it. Finn hadn't thought the man could feel shame, but he had. Jacob had buried the poor, mangled animal and let Finn say a prayer over it.

"I'm sorry about that, Miles," Finn said. "I know how he can be when he's drinking."

"It's because you're not here!" Miles cried, hands fisting now at his sides and cheeks flushing an ugly red. "I'll only get Christopher if you promise to come back!"

The very thought of returning to Tanglewood as their slave again had Finn's stomach churning. He knew he would never do that. But he also knew that Miles was quite capable of ignoring his pleas for Christopher if he didn't answer in the affirmative. Finn licked his lips as he prepared to lie, but then he remembered what he knew about Fae deals. They worded the deals very carefully so that the Fae would come up on top. Finn had every intention of returning to Rirea so if he said that… well, it wouldn't be a lie at all.

"Miles, I promise you that I will be returning to Rirea," Finn said confidently.

Miles blinked back what definitely were tears. "Do--do you mean it?"

Finn felt a faint stirring of guilt, but then he realized that such guilt was misplaced. His stepbrother wanted him back to help him dress, clean his room and fetch him things. He didn't care about Finn, miss Finn, or want Finn back just for him.

So he said coolly, "I mean it."

"I'll get Christopher for you then," Miles said and moved to go to his door. He turned back though and asked, "You'll still be here, won't you?"

"Of course, go get Christopher."

"It's just that he will be mad at me as well for allegedly telling tales if I brought him back and you weren't here," Miles said.

"Understood. I will be here."

Miles then disappeared from view. Finn didn't have time to worry about his own father looking for him as the time difference re-asserted itself and his stepbrothers were before him in what seemed like seconds.

Finn's eyes widened when he saw Christopher's face. His elder stepbrother had always been slim, but now he looked gaunt, starved. His high cheekbones were far more pronounced as were the *bruises* that colored the right side of his face an ugly black and purple. Yet despite these changes in his physical appearance, Christopher stared at him with that usual intense intelligent interest. His eyes roamed over the Luminus with the hunger to *know* how it worked. He didn't dare touch it though.

"I told you! There's Finn! He wants you for some reason! But he said he'd come back," Miles pronounced.

Christopher's sneer was brief. He clearly didn't believe Finn would come back, but he hid his usual emotions.

Beatings and starvation have caused him to be wary, Finn thought sickly.

"Are you all right, Finn? You look well, but… are you alright?" Christopher asked.

Finn's lips parted as surprise ran through him. Miles hadn't asked him that, because Miles hadn't cared one way or another. But Christopher had asked, because

he *did* care. He'd even wanted to give Finn a funeral. That was something. He was shocked at how deeply it moved him.

"I am very well. But you do not look so," Finn pointed out.

"Well, that's not important. I'm just glad… glad you aren't dead," Christopher said and his voice was thick. He swallowed. "I didn't mean to leave you behind. I thought you were following us. But I should have checked. I should have--"

"It's all right," Finn stopped the rush of recriminations from Christopher's mouth. How strange to know *now* that Christopher cared. Perhaps it was being in Finn's position as scapegoat in the family that had opened Christopher's eyes or maybe he was simply so beaten down that he couldn't hide his emotions as well anymore. Finn tried to give him a grin as he said, "If I had been smart I would have been right behind you."

"But you would have been back here rather than wherever you are and that… wouldn't have been smart," Christopher said.

"He said he's coming back! Don't make him stay away! We need him here!" Miles wailed.

Christopher ignored him and studied Finn's clothes, but not as Miles did, but more to understand Finn's circumstances. "You found your father?"

Finn was surprised again, but Christopher had always been terribly clever.

"Yes."

"He didn't know about you, did he?" Christopher guessed right again.

"No."

"And he loves you?" Christopher asked, his voice cracking a little on the word "loves".

Finn whispered, "Yes, very much."

A weary smile appeared on Christopher's lips. "Good. I'm happy for you, Finn."

Finn found that his throat was too tight to say anything. But internally he was telling Christopher that if he got the Luminus to Rohan that he would *never* be under Lord Gerard Steward's control again. Rohan would help keep Christopher safe, find him someplace to stay, and to continue with his work. Finn was sure of it. But he couldn't say any of it out loud for Miles was there and would immediately run to their father. Even though he could be freed, too, he still wanted his chains.

Christopher though cleared his throat and said, "Now, you asked for me. But I can't think of what I can possibly do for you."

Finn smiled. He hoped that Christopher would read between the lines and understand that if he helped Finn, he would be helping himself.

"Do you remember the three men we met in the woods that day we… we lost one another?" Finn asked.

Miles perked up. "Oh, yes, the man in the fancy hat who--"

"Wasn't in charge," Christopher interrupted his brother who gave him a moue of hurt. But this tone and behavior was more the Christopher that Finn knew and he was glad his stepbrother's fire hadn't been completely put out. "Yes, I remember them well. The one in charge… he seemed familiar to me though I don't know where or why I would know his face."

"You'd know him from the image on the coins that bear his likeness," Finn explained. "He is King Rohan De Clare."

Christopher sucked in a sharp breath and his eyes widened, but he said nothing else.

"That was the *king*?!" Miles bobbled. Then he blinked. "But he was all drab and dressed in dirty armor and--"

“Rohan has no need for stately robes. He is not that kind of leader,” Finn explained hastily. “He is a… we are… *close* to one another. He and I.”

Christopher slowly nodded. “He was there to see you. That’s why you were acting so strangely when I insisted on coming with you into the forest that day.”

“Yes, we were planning to meet.” Finn smiled. He couldn’t help it at the thought of all that trouble that Rohan and the others had been intent on getting into in order to change that dingy cabin into something romantic. “But things went awry as you know.”

“The king was gone for a time too… just like you,” Miles started to put it together.

“Why did he return without you?” Christopher asked, frowning.

“It wasn’t either of our choices. My father objected to… it doesn’t matter,” Finn said with a wave of his hand.

“Your father objected to a *king* courting you?” Miles really did boggle. “I mean… that’s what you’re saying he did, right? It wasn’t some torrid affair?”

“No, Miles, it wasn’t that. It’s very special, but my father is… he does not like the De Clares for many reasons,” Finn explained awkwardly, not wanting to tell them yet who his father was. Better to do that *after* they got to Rohan.

“And your father has enough power to send a Rirean king back home with a flea in his ear?” Christopher lifted his right eyebrow.

Finn only nodded. Christopher’s eyes went distant. He was clearly putting two and two together. But would he really alight on the fact that Finn was the son of the Fae king? After him serving them all those years how could they see him as royal?

Finn continued, “I need you to get the Luminus to him at Reave Castle.”

“Us? Get in the castle? Even if you know him, they aren’t just going to let us in!” Miles squawked.

“The other two men with him that day--who are also my friends--are Lord Serxio Lemos--he’s the one with the hat--and Guard Captain Leonid Blanchet,” Finn stated. “While you likely won’t be allowed to see Rohan at first, I am certain if you ask for one of them and mention my name, they will come to you and get you and the Luminus to the king.”

“Won’t you be able to tell them yourself over this--this thing?” Miles asked.

“I don’t know if it will still keep working while it is moving. I am guessing not,” Finn stated. “But once you set it up again in the castle, I’m sure it will.”

I hope it will, Finn thought, but did not say.

Christopher nodded. He was already studying the Luminus for transport. “I think Miles and I can carry it down. We can then load it into a cart and take it to the castle.”

Finn felt another wave of gratefulness flow through him. Christopher would make sure this happened. And he hadn’t asked for anything in return. He likely knew he would have a king’s gratefulness, but if Rohan had been a different sort of man than he was, that could have meant nothing. Christopher was willing to risk much for what could lead him to ruin.

“But Father…” Miles’ voice was small and uncertain.

“He’s completely passed out and won’t wake for hours. We can do this without him knowing if we act now,” Christopher said.

“Why don’t we just go ask the king to come *here* and--”

“NO!” Both Christopher and Finn shouted this.

Miles cowered. “All right! All right! It was just a suggestion.”

Finn did not want his stepfather involved in this at all. Christopher clearly didn’t as well. He likely believed if his father was a part of this then he would gain

nothing and be enslaved still. Not that Finn would allow that, but he understood Christopher's position.

Christopher met Finn's gaze again as he said, "We will get the Luminus to King Rohan. You have my word, Finn."

"Thank you, Christopher. I will remain here while you do," Finn said.

"But it will take some time," Christopher warned.

"Time moves differently here. For you it might be hours, but for me only minutes will have passed," Finn assured him.

Christopher's eyes widened again, ever the scientist. But he grunted and said, "All right then. We shall get this done."

Finn closed his eyes in suppressed joy. In *minutes* he would be speaking to Rohan again. He just knew it.

THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY

Lightbringer burst into life. Blinding light filled the air. Rohan could not even see the undead man any longer. But he didn't need to. Lightbringer knew exactly where to cut. He sliced the mighty sword through the air. He hardly felt resistance as the blade cleaved the undead man in half. Only as the torso separated from the legs was Rohan able to see the body fall. Sludge-like, black material oozed from the severed halves instead of blood and pooled on the ground. The grass sizzled and the liquid bubbled. He took a step back.

"Watch out for the blood!" he cried.

"Rohan?! Rohan, what are these things?!" Serxio cried.

Serxio had his daggers out, but he was backing away from the undead Jeremiah. His mouth was open in an "O" of shock and horror as Jeremiah shambled towards him, arms outstretched, fingers curled into claws. The tips of his fingers were shredded down to bone. They wanted to dig into Serxio's flesh.

"What do I do?" Serxio shrieked.

"Stab it!" Leonid yelled as he slashed at the thinner figure of the remaining neighbor.

"He's already dead! What's stabbing going to do?" Serxio wailed.

"Just--just cut things off!" Leonid advised as he did just that.

He'd sheared off this thinner undead's right hand. Not that this slowed the undead down. There was just a stump of bone that he used to flail at Leonid. The missing limb lay *twitching* on the ground.

"Why is that hand still moving?" Serxio sounded shrill. "Watch out, Rohan! Yours is still moving too!"

"That's impossible! I've cut it in half… oh…" Rohan glanced down and saw that the top half of the undead man was dragging itself across the ground.

"Could you--ah, use your sword, Rohan? Burn them to ashes like the spiders?" Serxio swiped his daggers, slicing off pieces of Jeremiah's ragged shirt and flesh beneath. But Jeremiah didn't even flinch. He clearly didn't feel the wounds.

Rohan brought up Lightbringer. He tried to feel the power inside of it. He could but it seemed more distant than it had in the Empire. He lifted the sword so that its tip was aimed at Jeremiah's chest. But the undead boy lurched forward at that moment and Serxio was in the way. He'd been able to somehow direct the power before to spare the innocent, but he wasn't sure how he'd done it or if it would work this time. So he lowered his weapon.

Damn! Can't risk it! Might hit Serxio!

A hand curled around Rohan's right ankle. "Ah!"

It was the undead man he had sliced in half. The front half had gotten to him. Rohan's cry was full of disgust. These things were *unclean*. He sliced the arms at the wrist, but the hand still clamped around his ankle. He flung it off with another

shout. The hand went flying into the fire underneath the bubbling pot. It immediately burned to ashes.

"Fire! Fire kills them!" Rohan yelled.

He cut three branches from a nearby tree with Lightbringer and thrust their ends into the flames until they caught fire. He tossed one burning branch to Leonid who stabbed the branch into the thin undead's chest. Unlike normal human flesh, the undead's went up like dry paper. The thin undead threw back his head and let out a rattling scream as the flames consumed it.

Rohan stabbed the second branch into the back of the crawling undead. The undead let out a shrill scream, arched and the flames turned him into dark ash. That left only Jeremiah. It was different killing him than the others, because Rohan knew his name and his sister. He would see Hannah again and have to tell her about this.

No, I will not tell her this. She knows her brother is dead. This thing… it isn't him.

Rohan sent the final burning branch towards Jeremiah. Time seemed to slow as it spun through the air. It brushed against the boy's back. The clothing caught fire just as Jeremiah grabbed Serxio's shoulder. Leonid was there, dragging Serxio away just as Jeremiah's skin erupted in flames. Jeremiah screamed, an unearthly screech and then he fell forward and was utterly consumed. The three of them just stood there, breathing heavily, for long moments.

"Legs." Serxio pointed towards the unburned pair of undead limbs that still moved restlessly on the ground

"On it," Leonid said and grabbed another branch and set it on fire.

The legs gave one last kick and then were gone.

More heavy breathing, then Rohan shook himself.

"That was… unexpected," Rohan said as he sheathed Lightbringer.

"The undead," Serxio breathed, sagging against a tree. "By the gods, Marikoth didn't just drain these ones, he… he turned their bodies into monsters!"

Rohan turned to look at the bubbling "stew". He frowned. He reached down and grabbed his flask. He drained the water out and went over to the "stew".

"Ah, my king, I don't think you should go anywhere near that," Serxio said of the "stew".

"I want to take some to my uncle. He is not much of an alchemist, but perhaps he will know someone who can analyze it," Rohan said as he very carefully spooned some of the stew into his flask and re-topped it before snugging it back into his belt.

"Why? We know that fire kills them," Leonid said.

"Serxio assumed Marikoth gave the potion to people he drained. That, potentially, anyways, limits how many he can turn into these things. But what if Marikoth just made them drink it and they changed?" Rohan asked. "He could put it in a well, any water supply, and a whole town, a whole city, could be changed. We need to know how to counteract it."

"I don't think I'll be drinking water ever again," Leonid said, face pale.

"You don't drink it now. It's beer for breakfast. Beer for lunch. Beer for a mid-afternoon drink. And beer for dinner. Oh, and beer for a nightcap!" Serxio pointed out.

"Well, I won't even *consider* drinking it," Leonid answered with a shrug. "Do you suppose it could change you if you simply bathe in it?"

"Oh, no, no, no, you are not skipping bathing! You stink already as it is!" Serxio cried and put a hand up to his nose as if to keep out the foul odor.

“Not being turned into the undead is more important than my aroma!” Leonid though looked offended at being told he stank already.

“Gentlemen, I sincerely hope it doesn’t come to that, which is why we are going to have my uncle look at this,” Rohan said as he used the tip of his boot to tip the pot over. The “stew” flowed into the fire. The flames burned hotter and brighter. A foul black smoke rose from the burning liquid. Rohan quickly stepped well back from it so as not to inhale the fumes. Who knew what it could do to him? The fire sputtered out.

“Do you think Marikoth wants to make an undead army? Or do you think he just enjoys doing terrible things to human beings?” Serxio asked with a swallow.

“Better question: where do you suppose Marikoth is? This place is very cozy in a weird way,” Leonid said as he turned in a slow circle. “It seems like he could be back at any moment.”

“Yes, it does seem that way,” Rohan murmured.

“And where are the rest of the people? The ones he led away from Dawnmore?” Serxio asked.

“That is another good--what is that?” Rohan’s hand dropped to Lightbringer’s hilt.

“Oh, by the gods, that’s shuffling! And moaning!” Serxio was clutching his daggers again.

The sounds started off as soft as wind rustling through the trees, but soon it gained in volume until it blocked out every other sound. And it was coming from *every* direction. Rohan unsheathed Lightbringer even as the other two struggled to find some remnant of sparks left from the smoking fire.

“Dammit! It’s out!” Leonid cried.

“It doesn’t matter. I can use Lightbringer. Get behind me,” Rohan commanded. “Those I miss, take out their limbs! Take off their heads!”

Serxio and Leonid obeyed him as Rohan held Lightbringer out in front of him. The blade glowed, but it was weaker than ever before. How much magic was left within it? How much magic was inside of him? Would it be enough?

The first shambling undead came into view on his right. He extended Lightbringer towards it and, at first, he feared nothing would happen. But all at once, the runes along the sword’s hilt flared to life as that first undead shambled past the treeline. A ray of light exited the tip of the sword and struck the creature directly in the center of its chest. The undead simply ceased to be just like the spiders had.

“Behind us!” Leonid shouted.

“To our left!” Serxio yelled.

“To our right!” Leonid added.

Rohan turned, twisted, and spun. He sent rays of light in every direction. He nearly took off Serxio’s head as he swung Lightbringer in every direction. Leonid, however, grabbed the young lord and pulled him out the way. Rohan could hardly see. His vision was filled with black streaks where the blinding lights had been.

But there was another thing getting dark: his sword. The runes were hardly glowing any longer. He could feel the sword *pulling* power out of him to continue the onslaught. But it was getting harder and harder to do so. His arms were sagging. He had to consciously brace himself. And several times the undead got close enough that he sliced their heads off and slammed a foot into their bodies to send them falling down instead of turning them into nothingness. The undead continued to blindly quest for them. Never ceasing. Never ending.

“How many more are there?!” Serxio wailed. “There’s not this many people missing in Dawnmore!”

He was right. But he guessed now he knew where the people in the other empty farm houses had gone who had not been so clever and careful as Hannah had been. They had gone to Marikoth easily and eagerly, abandoning their lives behind them like leaves falling from trees when the seasons turned.

“AH! It’s got me!” Serxio cried as one of the undead grasped his shoulders and tried to drag him to the ground.

Rohan swept Lightbringer’s now completely dark blade and cut off the undead’s arms at the elbows. The foul black blood poured out, nearly splashing Serxio. The young lord twisted to the side at the last moment just before it pooled, sizzling, on the ground.

“We cannot keep this up much longer, your majesty!” Leonid shouted.

He was right. Exhaustion of a kind that Rohan had never felt before weighed his arms down like lead weights. The black flashes in his vision were no longer remnants of the light, but simply his own consciousness threatening to leave him. An undead rushed him. Rohan only had the strength to hold the sword in front of him and go down on one knee as the undead skewered itself on the blade. It still though reached for him. Its mouth was open and rotten, black teeth were bared. Bony fingers scraped along his skin. Teeth bit into his armor.

“Going down!” Serxio screamed as the undead piled on top of him.

“NO!” Leonid yelled as he, too, was overwhelmed.

No, no, this can’t be! I can’t let this happen! Rohan thought as he dug deep for more power, but it wasn’t there. *Finn, oh, Finn, I’m sorry.*

He didn’t know what he was apologizing for. Finn was safe on the other side of the Wall. He realized he should be apologizing for wanting the young man here. Thalanil was right. Finn should be kept safe, away from these monsters.

Away…

But then, just as the undead’s fetid breath was all the air that was given to him, there was the sound of hoofbeats and ululating cries that made him want to spring to attention and caused the hair on the back of his neck to stand on end. He recognized these war cries.

King Tearlach! How is he here?

The undead did not even turn their rotted necks to see who was coming. They continued to grind down on him and his friends, but swords were parting heads from bodies and fire arrows were turning others to ash. Rohan squeezed his eyes shut as the air was filled with their remnants and he couldn’t breathe. He turned his head into his shoulder to try and filter out some of the ash. But it did no good. He held his breath.

One beat.

Two beats.

Three beats.

He drew in a deep breath when he couldn’t hold his breath any longer. Fresh air filled his lungs. His eyelids flew open. The area was clear. The undead were gone. He reached over and touched Leonid’s shoulder. His Guard Captain spit out some of the ash and shook his head violently. Serxio still had his eyelids tightly shut and his arms were curled over his head.

“Serxio, Serxio, it’s all right. Open your eyes,” Rohan told him.

Slowly, the foppish lord opened his eyes and looked about. His head flew up reminding Rohan of a badger popping out of his hole. He blinked in amazement.

“They’re gone,” Serxio said.

“They’re gone,” Rohan agreed.

He stood up, sheathing his blade, before offering both men a hand up. They took it gratefully.

“Who saved us?” Serxio asked.

Rohan looked around them. He didn’t have to look far as he was met with the monarch of the Achuviel Kingdom before them on a massive black war horse that would have towered a head above Tempest.

“Oh, my, who is he?” Serxio murmured. “He’s quite… big.”

“Tearlach,” Rohan muttered.

“An Achuvien on Rirean land without permission,” Leonid growled.

“He did save us,” Serxio said.

“There is that,” Rohan agreed, but his mouth was pressed into a tight line.

Tearlach wore black armor with no royal crest upon his chest. The white fur that lined the interior of his cloak was the only color he had on. His skin was cadaverously pale. His hair was bleached of all color. His eyes were nearly white, but Rohan knew that they were the palest of blues. Flanking him were six massive warriors on similar steeds in that same black armor. They were all grim faced as if killing was all they did.

Tearlach gave him a slow, almost sensual smile as he said, “King Rohan, what a surprise to find you here!”

LOYALTY OF FEAR

"This is *madness*, Christopher," Miles whined for the fifth time since they had started carrying the Luminus out of his bedroom. "Father will *know*. He always knows!"

"He only knows because you *confess* everything if he even looks at you crosswise," Christopher hissed in response. "He is not a Mage. He has no intuitive powers. He's a drunk and a bully and--"

"Christopher, don't say that!" Miles' eyes looked ready to roll back in his head from fear.

"I am only in danger from Father if you tell him what I've said, but if this works… then both of us are free," Christopher said.

They had gotten the unwieldy Luminus down one flight of stairs. They were on the back stairs, which were far more narrow than the family stairs, but their father *never* came here and they were far from his study where he lay insensate after drinking all morning. Finn's absence had thrown their father into the darkest of moods, which had caused him to drink excessively so that he sunk yet deeper.

It was not because their father loved Finn. Oh, no, their father simply recognized that *without* Finn any hope of them making good marriages and becoming a part of the aristocracy was gone. The land was blooming for now, but how long would it last without Finn's yearly magical sacrifice?

When their father was not so inebriated as to be sleeping it off, he was beating on Christopher. But *that* had not been the worst blow Christopher received. Being their father's punching bag was nothing compared to losing his alchemy equipment. He would never forget or forgive their father for taking that from him. It was his life's work. Their father had smashed some of it to pieces and sold the rest for cheap. So even if Christopher had been inclined to betray Finn to their father in the hopes of getting his place back in the household--which he was not--he would have rejected it simply for the hot hatred that burned in him against the man who had done that.

But now, now he had a chance to get it all back and then some. All thanks to Finn. He was so glad he had trusted Finn and made that deal with him before they had lost Finn. He had a feeling it was the best thing he had ever done in his life.

"Do you really think that Finn knows the king?" Miles asked. "I mean, that's crazy! Finn and a king! Those people we met in the woods that day--"

"The middle one *was* the king," Christopher stated flatly as he delicately turned a corner of the staircase, keeping one hand firmly on the glass globe. While he had no idea how the Luminus worked, smashing the glass globe was a sure shot to making sure it never did again. It was not showing Finn's face any longer, but he was certain once they got it to the castle and set it down properly that it would. Or perhaps he just hoped that and hope was all he had anymore.

“So he and Finn met in the woods and… what? What do you suppose happened? Finn’s a servant! I mean--”

“You noted what he was wearing today, I’m sure,” Christopher said as he turned himself so that he was walking down the stairs backwards. They were only ten steps from the bottom.

“Why yes! It was quite nice material--”

“Surely you noticed the *birds* embroidered in silver thread around his collar,” Christopher cut his brother off or otherwise he’d be hearing about classes of silk forever. Two more steps and they would be down.

“Uhm, yes, yes, I did see the little silver birds--”

“They were *ravens*, Miles. Ravens,” Christopher again cut him off, realizing that Miles had not put two and two together.

“Ravens? Well, I suppose they were, but what does that matter?” Miles asked querulously. He didn’t like it when Christopher knew something he didn’t, which was all of the time.

“Ravens. *Ravenspar*,” Christopher literally spelled it out for him.

“Ravenspar?” Miles blinked stupidly.

“Yes, like King Thalanil *Ravenspar*. The Fae king of the Empire of the Eclipse Throne,” Christopher said.

They were at the bottom of the stairs just outside of the kitchen. He and Miles carried the Luminus to the back door and set it down. It took until then for Miles to speak.

“Are you saying that Finn--*our* Finn--is the son of a king?” Miles couldn’t quite hide the disbelief in his voice.

Christopher glanced back towards the interior of the house, listening intently for a moment. Nothing. Their father was still snoring away. He shouldered open the door. The creak it emitted had his heart pounding in his chest. Sweat broke out on his upper lip. The flesh between his shoulder blades tensed as if expecting a blow. But no one came to investigate. He let out a breath he hadn’t been aware he was holding. The two of them carried the Luminus outside. The moment the air touched his skin Christopher had to stop himself from running. They needed to be careful with the Luminus.

“How nice were Finn’s clothes on a scale of 1 to 10?” Christopher asked. “I’m guessing they’re about a 10.”

Miles pursed his lips. “Well, I could only *see* them, not touch the material--”

“Miles,” Christopher said warningly.

“A 10. Yes, all right, a 10,” Miles conceded.

“Think about Finn for a moment. Our Finn. He has the ability to bring the land back to life,” Christopher said. “Tell me, have you ever heard of another Fae doing that?”

“Uhm.”

“Oh, by the gods, do you *not* read? At all?” Christopher stared at his brother in dismay.

“Only the news! About the noble families--”

“Miles, your brain is undoubtedly rotting from disuse,” Christopher said as he pinched the top of his nose. “Finn’s abilities are different from a normal Fae’s. He’s dressed, as you say, in the best clothes. Those clothes bear the raven symbol. He is friends, or something more, with King Rohan. Connect the dots.”

They carried the Luminus over to the stable and set it down carefully.

“He’s… he’s…” Mile’s forehead cleared and his lips parted. “You think Finn’s a Fae prince.”

“I’m betting my life he is. Yours, too,” Christopher said. “Now, stay here, and keep quiet while I go get the horse and cart.”

They were just outside of the stable. He went inside to find the old nag, Nellie, staring at him rather balefully. She had not quite forgiven him for his failure to clean her stall the way she liked it. He did have a small, tart apple for her, which he used as a lure to get her out of said smelly, messy stall. While she was crunching that, he managed to get her harnessed up to the rickety cart. His muscles were screaming but he kept moving even as his legs trembled beneath him. That apple would have been the only food he’d had in two days. But he’d given it to her.

“You better get us to the castle in one piece, Nellie,” he told her as he petted her nose.

He led her out of the stable with the cart behind her. The wheels squeaked and the horse snorted. Every sound that was emitted had his heart in his throat. But they passed out of the stable and into the afternoon’s dull, gray light. The Luminus and Miles were still there and their father still was not. He urged Nellie to a halt and scrambled over to the Luminus.

“Come, we need to lift this up into the cart,” Christopher said to his brother as he grasped the one end, but Miles did not grab the other.

His brother was looking at the house and biting his lower lip. “I don’t think we should do this without Father. Going to the king without him? That would make him so angry, Christopher. Besides, if we tell him, he won’t be angry with you any longer and things will be as they were before when Finn comes back.”

“What? Miles, are you mad? Don’t you understand what our father is?” Christopher let out a choked sound.

It wasn’t just that his brother seemed to have forgotten that Finn had found his own father--king or no--and he was never coming back to them, but that Miles honestly thought it was better to share this good fortune with the man who had beaten Finn and then him to a pulp. Miles had been cuffed many a time as well.

“*What* is he?” Miles said mulishly. “He’s our father--”

“No! He’s a monster!” Christopher snapped. The raw anger and anguish in his voice was something he’d never heard there before.

Miles hadn’t either. He flinched and wrapped his arms around his torso. “Father is just a very stern man with high expectations of us--”

“He doesn’t love us, Miles. When Finn was here, he took out the evil inside of him on our stepbrother,” Christopher admitted now, horrified he had allowed it to go on. “It’s how we avoided his blows. Finn paid for us to be left alone. But now that Finn is gone, we are back in his crosshairs.”

“Only you are! And that’s because you did a bad thing! You--you took Finn out to the Wall for one of your stupid experiments and--”

“It *wasn’t* stupid! I’m trying to heal the land!” Christopher snarled.

Miles retreated from him and Christopher grimaced. He needed his brother’s help in getting the Luminus into the cart.

“Miles, *please*, I am begging you to help me with this,” Christopher turned his tone into one of abject pleading. This was something that Miles hadn’t heard out of him before either. “If you care for me at all… if you have any loyalty to me, *please*, help me do this.”

“I--I don’t think… no, Christopher, I can’t! Father will be so angry! I’m going to go get him,” Miles said as he backed away from Christopher.

For one wild and awful moment, Christopher considered tackling his brother to the ground and taking one of the stones nearby and striking him in the head. Over and over again until Miles *stopped* and couldn’t tell their father of his plans.

Couldn't tell anyone *anything* at all. He nearly vomited at the imagery of it.

No, no, no, I am not like our father. I'm not!

So as Miles turned to run inside, Christopher gathered all the strength he had, every ounce of determination, and all the hatred in his heart and lifted the Luminus up onto the back of the cart. His muscles strained. He felt something pop in his left shoulder, but he kept going. The edge of the Luminus touched the cart and he managed to shove it in. The glass sphere bobbled but then settled back in the stand. Christopher let out a sob. He was in agony, but the sob was one of triumph!

He managed to get up into the cart himself and cover the Luminus with a dirty tarpaulin. Then he took his seat at the front of the cart, and with the one arm that was still working, took the reins and urged Nellie forward. The nag whinnied, but she started to move.

As she picked up steam, Christopher kept looking over his throbbing shoulder at the Manor. But no one came out of the front doors screaming for him. Perhaps Miles had reconsidered. His brother likely would claim he had no idea where Christopher was when their father woke up. And then his father would take out his darkness on him.

Christopher tried to tell himself that Miles had made his choice. He had chosen loyalty to their father over loyalty to him and Finn. It was a loyalty of fear though. It was beaten into Miles' very body. Yet Christopher knew better than to stop and go back to his younger brother. He couldn't save him. He had to keep going.

UNEXPECTED MEETINGS

"Were you following us, Tearlach?" Rohan asked as he wiped sweat and blood from his face.

"Following you? Ah, I would follow you anywhere, Rohan, but *no*," Tearlach said with a bloodless smile. He slid out of the saddle and put his hands on his hips as he surveyed the clearing. "I was hunting these *things* and the one who makes them."

Serxio and Leonid stiffened and looked at Rohan. They were seated near the rekindled fire, helping with each other's wounds. But that was forgotten with Tearlach's words. What did the Achuvien king know of Marikoth?

"You tracked them all the way here from your lands to mine?" Rohan asked evenly as he lowered the piece of cloth from his face. "With *troops?*"

He tried to hide that his arms were still shaking from the battle and the use of his magic. But he doubted that Tearlach missed it. The Achuvien king walked over to the desk and was poking at the books there, but his pale eyes flickered to Rohan every few minutes.

"Only my personal guard." Tearlach gestured to the six, grim-faced men and women who were equipped with brutal-looking swords, daggers and bows. They had taken up strategic positions around the clearing. "Hardly *troops*. And I would remind you that your uncle invited me to come," Tearlach said as he turned on his heel to regard Rohan directly. His powerful arms slid behind his back. "My understanding was that you were *dead*. Clearly, you are not. And you are not the undead like these creatures were either."

"Indeed not," Rohan answered, which was really not an answer at all.

He almost asked Tearlach when that invitation had gone out. How many days had his uncle waited to reach out to Tearlach? But that would reveal too much. Not that Tearlach failed to miss some of the tension between him and his uncle.

"So, dear Uncle Hugues was a little *eager* to pronounce you having shuffled off your mortal coil, was he? I wouldn't have thought that of him. If he wanted the throne he could have murdered you in your bed when you were a child. Much less messy." Tearlach's lips twitched with what looked to be a smile.

Rohan couldn't hide his grimace. He had thought the same himself. But he said nothing.

"Where did you go that caused your dearest uncle to believe you demised?" Tearlach asked.

"The Empire," Rohan quipped.

Tearlach let out a deep chuckle. "My kind of trip. Did you kill many Fae there?"

"No, just spiders," Rohan answered. "So tell me more of what brought you here. These creatures and their creator. What do you know of them? And how did you manage to show up in the nick of time? Or perhaps we are just very lucky."

Tearlach's white eyebrows lifted in surprise and then he chuckled in amusement. "Such suspicion, Rohan! But I suppose if I'd had a relative call me *dead* and take my throne, I'd be a little suspicious myself. Yet, I assure you, I was tracking another prey altogether than you."

"King Rohan is *not* anyone's prey!" Leonid snapped, rising to his feet where his wounds were being treated.

Serxio rose, too, on unsteady legs. "That is beyond rude--"

But Rohan waved them down. Tearlach knew his words would inflame them, which would distract them all from him answering Rohan's questions. "King Tearlach likes his little jokes. Now, back to the matters at hand."

Tearlach's narrowed eyes had never left Rohan, but Rohan knew he had measured every single thing that had happened. He grunted and smiled before leaning against the desk. "I do enjoy my amusements. You must forgive me. I know my sense of humor is not everyone's cup of tea. But! In any case, I was tracking a *Fae*."

Marikoth, Rohan thought.

"He is a strange Fae. All Fae are strange, mind you, but this one is truly different. Hence, the undead, but more than that," Tearlach said. His gaze swept the forest that surrounded them. It looked more stark and diseased than ever before. Rohan felt a sense of shame that his kingdom looked as it did. "He drains and poisons the land. Yours is not the only one affected."

Rohan's eyes widened. "It isn't? Is your kingdom--"

"Not mine. Not yet. But mine has little to recommend it to a Fae. It is all hard-scrabble earth and stone. Hardly any life to steal," Tearlach admitted without any concern. "Hard land makes hard people. We Achuviens are proud of that. But I have seen evidence of this--this draining in Bolan and Sultane. Yours is just the most advanced of course."

Rohan frowned. That likely explained why those royals had so quickly agreed to his uncle's invitation for a summit. Rirea was not the only country at risk, just the one that was suffering most. For now.

How much energy does Marikoth need to sustain himself? Rohan wondered. *Not just one kingdom's life, but three? Is he using the power to create the undead? Or is it something else entirely?*

"But how did you find *us*? These undead are people from Dawnmore, not your country," Serxio pointed out.

"There are more than just these that we destroyed here." Tearlach gestured to the empty clearing. The bodies had all been burned and turned to ash. "But the reason we found you was the, ah, *fireworks* display." His eyes narrowed speculatively at Rohan and Lightbringer. "What weapon do you have that caused that exactly?"

Rohan resisted the urge to cover up the sword, even though Lightbringer was already sheathed and the runes were drained of light. It looked like a normal sword. Just as he looked like a normal human. Both were wrong.

"Nothing that need concern you, Tearlach."

"On the contrary, if you expect us to be friends and work together, Rohan, it would be wise to tell me all that we have to work with," Tearlach suggested.

"We have not yet agreed to anything," Rohan reminded him.

He strode past the Achuvien king and picked up all the books that Marikoth had left on the table. He paged through them. All appeared to be filled with complex spells and equations that were far beyond him. He intended to take these and the sample of "stew" back to his uncle.

But can I trust him to tell me the truth about what's in these? Rohan wondered.

"Keep your secrets. For now." Tearlach actually smiled as if amused by his refusal to say anything more.

"We should get out of the woods. Night falls early here. You do intend to stay at Reave Castle, do you not?" Rohan asked Tearlach. "Achuvia is a long way from here."

"I am most grateful for your invitation and hospitality. Yes, we will most gratefully go to the castle with you," Tearlach answered. He rubbed his gloved hands together. "We can talk! Discuss the future of our two great countries!"

"But should we not leave someone here to wait for the Fae?" Leonid asked.

Rohan looked at the clearing. It seemed drained of the bizarre coziness that it had held before they'd entered it. The magic that had sustained this place was gone. Was it because the undead were gone? Perhaps they had triggered some alarm that told Marikoth his secret lair had been found. Whatever had caused it, the clearing was once more just another part of the Lupine Woods, cold, diseased and wet.

"No, I don't think he'll be coming back to this location," Rohan answered.

He gestured for Serxio and Leonid to join him. Both men did with alacrity. Rohan started towards the path. Tearlach and his people had brought their horses into the woods, but they would not be able to ride faster than he and his friends could walk due to the difficulty of the terrain.

"You look very unwell, Rohan. You should ride my war horse, Wraith. He will carry you safely back to the castle," Tearlach offered and whistled low.

The war horse whose shoulder was above Rohan's head trotted over to his master. Wraith tossed his massive head back. His black coat was glossy. His mane and tail were lustrous and well cared for.

"Magnificent animal. But I have a mount by the road. And it is easier walking then riding in the woods. I would recommend that you walk your animals, too," Rohan suggested.

Tearlach thumped the beast's side. "As you wish. We'll go slow so we don't tire you."

"I'm quite well, thank you," Rohan lied.

They all started back down the path with Tearlach at his side. Rohan felt the Achuvien king studying him out of the corner of his eye. He resisted the urge to speak, though. If Tearlach had something he wished to ask then let him ask it.

"So… you are a magic user?" Tearlach made it sound like a question, but it was more a statement.

"I did not say that." Rohan now wished Tearlach had not spoken.

"Yet you are one. I thought it was just your sword. An enchanted weapon will work for humans, but not so powerfully," Tearlach said.

"Well, it wasn't enough against those creatures," Rohan said with a grimace.

"Every magic user has a natural reservoir of power to draw upon that replenishes over time. If you're new to this--and I'm betting you are--you haven't learned how to use yours effectively yet," Tearlach said. "And your reservoir may be *small*--"

"I don't think so," Rohan muttered as he remembered how much he could take from Finn.

"Ah, so you have some ideas here." Tearlach chuckled. "My guess is that your reservoir fills up slowly."

Probably because I'm meant to be paired with Finn, Rohan thought. *Could Tearlach know anything about Death Mages and Aeturnals? He knows about Marikoth.*

“Have you ever… heard of Bonded Ones?” Rohan asked.

“No, I cannot say that I have,” Tearlach answered.

“What about… types of Mages that *rely* upon one another? One can drain energy from their surroundings and feed it to the other? Have you ever heard of that?”

“Hmmm, that’s a very unique set of abilities on both sides. It would seem that one would be mostly useless without the other,” Tearlach said. “I certainly wouldn’t want that.”

“Not useless. Just powers not used to their best purpose or their greatest ability,” Rohan said.

“Are you saying that *you* are one of these strange beings?” Tearlach lifted an eyebrow.

“I… I don’t know. Perhaps.”

They remained mostly silent then until they returned to Hannah and Jeremiah’s house. A wave of sorrow washed over Rohan when he saw it. He hadn’t expected to find Jeremiah--or any of the other townsfolk--alive when he had realized that Marikoth was involved in their disappearances. But it was all the worse to think that her brother’s body had been used in such a sacrilegious manner. He had thought to never tell her, but maybe he would at some point. She was too fragile, he thought, to do so now. And part of him didn’t wish to say anything until he had a solution to Marikoth.

Their horses were where they had left them. Thunder actually looked pleased to see him, or so he thought. The grass here was sparse so she likely wanted the sweet hay and apples that she’d be fed at the royal stables.

He lifted himself up into the saddle. The others did the same. Serxio and Leonid moved over to him.

“Are you all right? I know he’s not your favorite,” Leonid whispered as they rode together down the road three abreast with Serxio on the other side of him with Tearlach and his people trailing behind them as they headed down the road to the castle.

“Other than being… well, *creepy,* what’s the story here?” Serxio asked.

“Oh, this was before your time,” Leonid said.

“Something happened before me?” Serxio sounded aghast.

Rohan chuckled. “Yes, Serxio, a few, small things happened before you joined my court.”

“Oh, well, then that’s all right, I expect,” Serxio smiled, pleased at this.

“Except *this* is pretty big.” Leonid grinned.

“What?!” Serxio glanced between the two of them.

“Leonid, it is not big,” Rohan chastised him. “Well…” He glanced over his shoulder at Tearlach who tilted his head to the side at him. He quickly turned around. “When I was crowned, Tearlach came to give me his… respects. He also--”

“Wanted to marry Rohan,” Leonid got out with a snicker.

“WHAT?!” Serxio squawked.

“Everything all right up there?” Tearlach called.

“Everything is fine,” Rohan said. “Serxio, quiet.”

“Yeah, you big dingus. Quiet,” Leonid said with another snicker.

“But--but--but how could you not tell me this? That is big news!” Serxio hissed.

“Well, I want him about as much now as I did then so his big plans for our nuptials have come to naught,” Rohan remarked dryly.

Serxio looked back at Tearlach, waved, and turned back again. “I think he still has feelings for you.”

“Let’s hope not,” Rohan muttered.

“He did say that he’d wait for you,” Leonid teased. “Maybe he’s come to see if his patience has borne fruit.”

“Borne fruit?” Serxio shuddered. “Using that type of imagery with Tearlach wanting Rohan… well, yuck, Leonid, yuck.”

Leonid just laughed, completely unrepentant.

“Would you mind, gentlemen, if I rode with your king for a time?” Tearlach asked.

“Rohan?” Serxio asked.

“Do you want to ride with him, my king?” Leonid remarked.

He nodded, touched by their affection. The two of them allowed their horses to fall back while Tearlach rode up beside him. Wraith towered above Thunder and so Tearlach did over Rohan as well. It was childish to not want to be “lower” than the Achuvien king. Rohan normally did not care about such things. But he knew that Tearlach did and sought to use that to his advantage. Besides, he already thought of Rohan as a “boy” and a “beautiful flower” that he’d like to bring to his bed. Rohan was none of those things.

“What do you know about the Fae creating these creatures? You said he was strange. So you met him?” Rohan asked Tearlach.

He noticed then in the gloaming how few lights were on in the farm houses. He now knew where all those people were.

Tearlach nodded. “He offered his services to me as a court magician.”

Rohan’s eyebrows lifted. “Marikoth is your magician?”

“Only for a short time before he betrayed me,” Tearlach admitted with a shrug.

“A Fae serving a human, even a royal one, is not normal. And I would not think he, of all Fae, would even consider such a thing.”

Tearlach’s eyebrows lifted. “So you know him too?”

“Not personally, no. But I have a--a friend who encountered him,” Rohan stated. “From even that brief description, I cannot imagine him serving anyone.”

“Oh, nor can I! But desperation can make people do things that they would never otherwise do,” Tearlach responded. “And he is an exile. A Death Mage.”

“He was desperate? How? For what?”

“So many questions!” Tearlach slapped his armored knee as he chuckled. “Well, for one thing, his hunger was growing. Whatever causes this,” Tearlach gestured to the dead or dying fields, “is not out of *choice*. Not any longer. He’s out of balance and believes the only way to fix that is to return *home*.”

This was something new he had not considered. He had thought that Marikoth only wanted revenge against Thalanil and to take over as king. The way that Finn had described him was insanely angry about being cast out. But then he thought about the overgrowth in the Empire. That was clearly out of balance. Rohan’s own reading had led him to believe that Death Mages and Aeturnals had kept that overgrowth from happening. The Death Mages drained the extra life and the Aeturnals stored it in power stones, weapons and other magical items. Without them there, the Empire had slowly, and then more quickly, become overgrown. It meant that Finn and Marikoth were not aberrations and that their powers were not wrong or evil, but *necessary*.

“So why doesn’t he petition King Thalanil for such a return?” Rohan asked, already knowing the answer, but wanting Tearlach’s take.

“Because Marikoth--that is our strange Fae--is the elder brother to King Thalanil and *rightful* heir to the Empire of the Eclipse Throne,” Tearlach answered.

“Then why is he here and not on the throne that is *rightfully* his? Allegedly?”

Tearlach chuckled. “Because his powers are not like the other Fae’s. He’s a powerful Mage. The most powerful I’ve ever seen.”

“Then you have not seen his brother,” Rohan muttered, remembering how he had been flicked from the Empire easily.

“You met the Fae king on your little *trip* to the Empire, did you? Wanted to get some revenge?” A slow, almost sensual smile crossed Tearlach’s face.

Rohan actually considered this question. He had believed all his life that Thalanil had killed his parents. The reason that Thalanil had done this? He hadn’t known. But now… now he wasn’t so sure it had happened at all. But if Thalanil had not killed them, who had? And why?

“I wanted to talk to King Thalanil about Marikoth and other things,” Rohan finally said.

“And did you? What did he say?” Tearlach asked airily.

Rohan gritted his teeth. “We didn’t actually get to any of that.”

“Really? What did you discuss?”

“It was more about his--his son than anything else,” Rohan muttered but then Finn’s face flashed before his mind’s eyes and his heart ached.

“His *son*? I was under the impression that he was childless,” Tearlach remarked.

“Both he and his son just recently found one another,” Rohan said.

He had thought that his tone and expression were neutral, but Tearlach somehow read the truth in it.

“This son… you know him *well*?” Tearlach asked.

“Yes.” Clipped. Not inviting for further comment.

That did not stop Tearlach. “A friend? More than a friend? Yes, *more* than a friend. And things went badly with the good Fae king. He did not want a human sniffing about his royal blood. Even with *your* royal blood? Perhaps *especially* yours.”

“It’s irrelevant.” Rohan did not know if he was saying that Thalanil’s feelings were irrelevant or his feelings were or even Tearlach’s amusement was.

“It isn’t if we’re going to go to war against him or anything,” Tearlach said merrily.

Rohan snapped his head towards the Achuvien king. “What?”

“That is what this summit is about, yes? Jointly attacking good King Thalanil Ravenspar, is it not?” Tearlach asked.

Of course that *was* what his uncle would have intimated. Because Hugues believed that Thalanil was the cause of the problems in Rirea. But Tearlach knew he was not. So why did he wish to go up against the Fae king?

“Thalanil is not the enemy. Marikoth is,” Rohan answered.

“Ah, but you cannot deal with one without the other,” Tearlach answered.

“And how is that?”

They were passing through Dawnmore itself now. He was glad to see that the streets were mostly clear though it was before curfew. People were in their homes, which meant that Marikoth wouldn’t be able to get to them as easily. Or he hoped not.

“The only way to lure Marikoth out into the open is for his brother to come out from behind the Wall. Thalanil won’t come just because you ask him nicely,” Tearlach said. “No, you must strip down his defenses. You must lay him bare. Only then will both brothers be exposed and we can deal with them.”

“You don’t think we can find Marikoth without exposing Thalanil?” Rohan asked.

“I assure you that Marikoth won’t be seen by his enemies until he wishes to be,” Tearlach answered.

They crossed over the silver bridge and were at the castle’s portcullis. That was when he heard a young man’s voice rising in anger and desperation.

“No! No, you don’t understand! This is for the *king*! Don’t touch it! You could break it!” The young man’s voice was shrill.

His Guards had surrounded a rickety cart that held what looked like a crystal ball as large as his head in an elaborate stand.

“That’s a Luminus,” Tearlach breathed out as if he had not meant to say it.

“Get your hands off it!” The young man shrilled. “Call Leonid Blanchet or Lord Lemos! I’m Finn Ashton’s brother! They’ll know who that is!”

Finn...

“Hold!” Rohan cried.

The half dozen guards who were surrounding the young man and the cart froze then turned. When they saw it was him, they all dropped to their knees, leaving only the young man awkwardly standing there.

“My king!” they cried almost in unison.

The young man’s eyes widened. He stepped towards Rohan, lifting one hand as if to reach for the king. He quickly dropped it and gracelessly lowered himself to one knee. The way he held his one arm against his chest it was clear that it was broken or desperately injured in some other way.

“King Rohan! Please, please listen to me,” the young man begged.

Rohan slid from his horse. “I am listening. And I remember you. You are Finn’s stepbrother, are you not?”

“Yes, my name is Christopher, but that doesn’t matter,” Christopher told him and grimaced as his injured arm was jostled.

“Get up to your feet, boy. What do you have to tell me,” Rohan said.

He offered Christopher a hand up, which the boy gratefully took. His feelings towards Finn’s stepfamily were not good. But this was one of the brothers. The father was the problem. And Christopher looked… ill-used. There were bruises at his wrists and at his collar. His sunken cheeks and hungry, desperate eyes reminded him too much of Finn that first time they’d met.

“Finn contacted me through that.” Christopher pointed at the crystal ball. “He told me to bring it to you.”

“Good lord, what is it?” Serxio asked as he hopped down from his horse.

“Looks Fae,” Leonid remarked.

“It is. It is a Luminus. The boy speaks true. These are rare. They allow you to speak to others who have a paired Luminus,” Tearlach said as he stepped over to the cart. Rohan had the desire to order him away from it. If this could help him reach Finn then there was nothing more valuable in all the world. Tearlach spun around, a strangely triumphant look on his face. “I can show you how to use it.”

FIRST SIGHT

"Bring it in here," Rohan directed the Guards who carried the delicate Luminus into the antechamber of his bedroom. He quickly moved a table out of the way so that the Fae artifact could be placed before a sofa. "Put it there."

They set the Luminus where he indicated and bowed low. He saw one of them look around curiously, never having been in his private apartments before. Leonid cuffed that one lightly on the back of the head.

"You're not here to sight-see. Go back to your duties," Leonid instructed the men.

The Guards bowed again and went out, closing the doors behind them. That left himself, Leonid, Serxio, Christopher and Tearlach in the room. He wished it was just him, but he needed Tearlach's help to use the Luminus and the others all wanted to see Finn, too. Rohan would have his time alone with Finn.

If the Luminus worked.

If it hadn't been damaged in that rickety cart.

If Finn was still waiting by the other artifact.

If… if… if…

Too many ifs that had his palms sweating.

"My king, perhaps Christopher could use a blanket? He's shivering and looks quite unwell," Serxio suggested softly with a tip of his head towards the silent, intense young man. "Not to mention that *arm*."

Other than the faint shivers running through him, Christopher was standing very still in the center of the room. Only his eyes moved. He was taking in everything and Rohan guessed that he would remember all of it. As still as he was, he looked ready to bolt at a moment's notice. He was on high alert. He saw yet more bruises on the pale skin of his cheeks. The tattered, dirty clothing likely hid a multitude of other injuries.

What is going on in that house? Rohan thought and a wave of rage mixed with sadness went through him.

"We need to get him a doctor and all the rest," Rohan said, feeling guilty he had not thought of that himself. But all other thoughts had been pushed out by the desire to speak to Finn.

Serxio grabbed a blanket from the back of a chair and approached Christopher, smiling gently. "Here, put this around your shoulders. Would you like something to eat? Perhaps you should sit down. I'm going to summon a doctor."

Christopher's expressions went from blank to suspicious to surprise. He stared at the blanket with concern and his mouth twisted.

"I'm… I'm dirty," Christopher said finally. "I wouldn't want to soil the king's blanket or furniture."

“That doesn’t matter, Christopher,” Rohan said kindly. “I’m always dirty myself. This furniture can take a beating and everything can be washed. Please, sit.”

“About the doctor… I don’t need one. I’ve done this before.” Christopher indicated his shoulder. “It will right itself.”

“But a doctor could just make sure it was all right,” Serxio said gently.

“No, thank you. I find most of them quacks. I assure you that I will be fine.”

“Oh, well, I see! You know your stuff.” Serxio cast a worried glance at Rohan, but he just nodded.

The young man did not want a doctor. Whether he really would heal fine or had a distrust of them was immaterial at the moment, he would not violate Christopher’s consent at this time. He had a feeling the young man had been through enough of that.

Christopher allowed Serxio to place a blanket over his shoulder and went over to one of the leather chairs. He perched on the very edge of it, knees and feet together, hands stiffly placed on his thighs as if to make himself as small as possible. It spoke to Rohan. It told him that abuse was common in that house.

If this is how that man treats his own blood, I can only imagine what he did to Finn, he thought with a queasy feeling.

Rohan stirred himself, dragging his gaze away from Christopher’s slight form. “And, Serxio, can you get some food for all of us.”

Serxio glanced longingly at the Luminus but quickly nodded and headed out. Rohan did not keep servants lingering around his quarters. He did as much for himself as they would allow him to. But he was certain that Serxio wouldn’t have to go too far to find someone who could take the message down to the kitchen.

Rohan walked over to the Luminus. Tearlach had stripped off his leather gloves and the long cloak he wore, leaving himself in just his armor. He was on his haunches before the Luminus. His long, white fingers traced the curved line of the wood of the stand, but he didn’t actually touch it. His expression was blank, but it was clear he was feeling many things but didn’t want to share them.

Why should a Fae artifact affect Tearlach at all? Rohan wondered. *There is no great connection between the Fae and the Achuviens.*

“Well?” Rohan asked, unable to be patient any longer. “How do I speak with Finn?”

“It appears this one is already paired so we don’t need to worry about that. It will automatically connect to the one he spoke to Christopher on,” Tearlach murmured. He then got to his feet and his pale blue eyes narrowed. “This is a *royal* Luminus.”

“Meaning?” Rohan asked.

Tearlach looked at him. “Meaning that this one and the one it is connected to are all under King Thalanil’s control.”

“That is not surprising considering who Finn is,” Rohan answered.

“Who is this Finn exactly?” Tearlach asked darkly, eyes narrowing.

He reached to touch Rohan’s cheek, but Rohan sidestepped it.

“That’s the king’s business not yours,” Leonid growled and placed himself between Rohan and Tearlach. “Tell King Rohan what he wishes to know and ask no questions.”

Rohan put a hand on Leonid’s shoulder and urged the Guard captain to back down.

But Tearlach ignored Leonid’s outburst. He remained quiet for long, uncomfortable moments and then he chuckled darkly. “Ah! Finn is King Thalanil’s

son! Your *lover*?" He made it sound like a question, but then nodded to himself. "Yes, I see he is. How interesting! And I thought you would remain faithful to *me*."

Christopher's head shot up at that. Leonid bared his teeth like a loyal, angry dog. Rohan did not deny his relationship with Finn--he wanted to shout it to the stars--but he did not add to it. What did Tearlach think? He couldn't still be holding onto some kind of flame for him? It was absurd.

"What does it mean exactly that the Luminus is within the Fae king's control?" Rohan asked, sidestepping all of this.

"It means that Thalanil himself will be able to access this connection while it is ongoing… if he is aware of it," Tearlach explained. "But perhaps, more importantly, he will be able to view this conversation long after it occurs. It is recorded, not on paper, but via images. So anything you say on here, he will know."

"I see why you are concerned. But we'll have to risk it," Rohan answered. "Now tell me how to speak to Finn."

"We didn't have to do anything to make it work before," Christopher said softly. "I hope I did not break it…"

"You didn't," Tearlach answered curtly.

"It's also been over an hour since we spoke. He might not still be there," Christopher added.

"Time is different in Rirea than the Empire," Rohan assured him. "An hour here is--"

"Less than ten minutes there," Tearlach said, which again made Rohan wonder why the Achuvien king was so very knowledgeable about the Fae. He'd have to find out. Tearlach continued, "So long as this Finn is by the Luminus all Rohan needs to do is to place his hands on the glass ball and it will open a line of communication with the other." Rohan went to do just that, but Tearlach blocked his way, which caused Leonid to bristle on his behalf. Rohan's own temper was fraying, but he held himself in check. Leonid was acting out for him. "The Luminus stops time in the immediate area so you'll feel a little… *funny* when you first connect."

"Right, good to know." Rohan then physically moved Tearlach's arm from in front of him and approached the Luminus.

Rohan stretched out both hands. His palms were an inch from the ball. He thought he felt a faint electrical snap against his fingers as he lowered them to touch the glass ball's surface. The globe suffused with a silvery light. Rohan's eyes widened. The world spun and he found himself gritting his teeth as nausea set in. He must have closed his eyes, because the first moment he realized that he'd connected with Finn was hearing the young man saying his name.

"Rohan? Oh, by the gods! Rohan, it's you!" Finn cried.

Rohan's eyelids flew open and he gazed into the heart of the globe. There was Finn's face. He looked so beautiful. The memory of Finn was *nothing* compared to the reality. The dark hair with the wing of white at his temple. The bright green eyes. The sun-kissed skin. The expressive mouth. Rohan found himself touching the glass as if he could touch the young man's cheek. But his fingertips just found the slick surface of the crystal ball.

"I know! It looks so real. Like you can touch… but we can't," Finn said. Tears of joy were running down his cheeks. "I wish we--we *could* touch. I've missed you so much!"

"And I you," Rohan said. He was suddenly keenly aware of Tearlach and the others watching this interaction. But he ignored them. It was just him and Finn. And Finn was all that mattered. "Oh, Finn, to *see* you…" He realized now that he'd feared in the darkest depths of his heart that he never would have again. But Finn

was here. Finn was speaking. And Rohan felt like a man dying of thirst in the desert and Finn being a pool of cool, clean water. “I’m so glad that you found this--this Luminus!”

A broad smile crossed Finn’s face. “It’s how my mother and father spoke when they weren’t together physically. It was in Miles’ room of all places. It had been languishing in the attic before that. Leonid!” Finn cried when he caught sight of the Guard captain. “Oh, how I’ve missed you as well.”

“As have I, Finn,” Leonid beamed. “You look well. Very well.”

Finn absently touched the collar of a very fine tunic. “As do you! All of you look well! I’m so relieved. But where is Serxio?”

“Getting food!” Leonid chuckled roundly.

Finn laughed delightedly as well. “Of course, he is! Though he should not be nervous just speaking to me.”

“When it isn’t *nervous* eating, it’s just eating eating with him,” Leonid snorted.

“Well, so long as he brings enough for everyone else!” Finn grinned.

Finn looked to have put on some weight himself. His cheeks were fuller. His hair was glossy. There was a genuine gleam of health around him. Rohan’s eyes slid to Tearlach. The Achuvien king was stroking his bare chin and looking at Finn speculatively. Rohan slid over slightly to block his view.

“And my stepbrothers? Are they there with you? Christopher and Miles brought the Luminus to you, didn’t they? Are they all right?” Finn asked.

Christopher practically leaped from his chair, just barely keeping the blanket over his shoulders. “Finn, I’m here.”

Rohan stepped aside so that Finn could see Christopher. Finn smiled at his stepbrother but his eyes danced around looking for someone else.

“Did everything go okay? Did you and Miles get into--into any trouble?” Finn sounded anxious and his hands twisted in front of him.

Christopher opened his mouth and shut it several times. Finally, he said, “I got away fine. Father was still… asleep. But Miles couldn’t, uhm, he couldn’t--”

“He didn’t leave, did he?” Finn guessed and his shoulders slumped.

“No. He… he stayed,” Christopher sounded bitter. But then, with an effort, he tried to defend his brother, “But you mustn’t blame him. Neither of us should. He still thinks our father… He still hopes that Father will be different if only he says the right things or acts just so. He doesn’t understand that it will never change. That Father will never change.”

The grief in that last sentence had Rohan flinching. Leonid met his eyes and his Guard captain’s mouth flattened. Rohan knew how lucky he was that his parents had been loving and kind to him. He’d never taken that for granted, but it still shocked him at how many parents *weren’t* like that, but instead were outwardly cruel.

“I know,” Finn said gently. “You don’t have to explain further. I’m just sorry…”

“I am too.” Christopher straightened. “He’ll have told father… about me taking the Luminus to the king and… that you’re still alive.”

Finn gave a crooked, sad smile. “You remember how you told me that if you had my powers you would have learned all about them?”

Christopher blinked. “Yes, yes, I do.”

“Well, I’ve started on that journey. And no one will stop me.” Finn’s expression hardened then as if he were thinking of a certain person who had tried to. “But what I’ve learned already ensures that he won’t ever be able to hurt me or mine ever again.”

Christopher's eyes widened. "That's… that's good, Finn. I'm so happy for you. I wish I… I had such a way to keep myself safe."

"You do," Rohan cut in.

Finn's eyes widened even as his lips had parted to say something. Rohan knew that Finn would have pointed out that Christopher was part of the "mine" of that statement he had made. And though Finn was not here physically to protect his stepbrother, Rohan was. Christopher turned to look at him, surprise written on his face, before he quickly turned it blank, not wanting to show anything.

He's probably been punished so often. He hides what he truly feels, Rohan realized.

"I'm sure I can handle whatever fallout there is," Christopher stated simply even as his shoulders tensed as if expecting a blow.

"You're *never* going back there," Rohan stated. "So you don't have to handle anything. We'll make a place for you here."

"Rohan! Thank you!" Finn cried.

Leonid nodded in agreement and a flash of a smile crossed the Guard captain's face. Tearlach merely watched them all still stroking his chin as if this were an alien scene that he could not quite understand.

"I can *do* anything. I *will* do anything you need," Christopher said, words rushing out. "I'm smart and hardworking and--"

"He is, Rohan. Christopher is probably the smartest person I know. He's an alchemist. Taught himself," Finn added, his eyes shining as he gazed at Rohan.

"We actually need an alchemist," Rohan said as his hand drifted to the bottle of "stew" he still had from Marikoth's camp.

"I can do that. I'm very good at that," Christopher stated firmly. His sallow cheeks flushing with color. "My father threw away my alchemical apparatus, but if I could get access to one--"

"Christopher," Rohan said as he put a hand on the young man's shoulder, "even if you were good at *nothing*, I would not send you back there."

Christopher let out a shuddery sigh and staggered back a step.

"Whoa there!" Leonid cried as he grabbed hold of the young man. "Let's get you back sitting."

"I'm just… hungry. I haven't eaten… in a while," Christopher's voice faded off. He allowed himself to be seated again and put his hands in his lap. His voice was hoarse as he said, "T-thank you, King Rohan."

"You don't need to thank me," Rohan told him.

Christopher drew in a deep, steadying breath, "Actually, I *do*. I probably shouldn't say this, but… I don't deserve your kindness. If Finn weren't so good, he would tell you that, too."

"You do, Christopher!" Finn cried. "No one deserves to be treated as Gerard treated all of us!"

"I should have helped you, Finn," Christopher said. His fingers twining together so tightly that his flesh blanched.

"You did help me in the end," Finn claimed. "You asked me to go into business with you--"

"Only because I needed *you*. No one else could do what you do. It was selfish. A way to save myself, and you know it," Christopher admitted. Rohan could see how every word cut into him. Christopher swallowed again before continuing, "I was afraid of him… our father. I've always been afraid. So when he took out his brutality on you, I was *relieved*. So long as he focused on you, he wouldn't on *me*."

"I'm glad his attention wasn't on you before, Christopher," Finn insisted.

“So you should pay for me to be left alone? No. But it wasn’t just him who treated you poorly. How I treated you… there’s really no excuse,” Christopher said. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about that. And I’m… so sorry, Finn.”

“We were both his victims, Christopher. Miles, too. When you’re frightened, you act in ways you wish you didn’t. But the fear is greater than anything,” Finn said.

Christopher’s right foot jiggled up and down. He didn’t look like he thought that excused him.

“Fear is weakness,” Christopher whispered. “You were never weak, Finn. He just beat you down. All of us did. And you were trying to be good for other people.”

“Christopher,” Finn sighed. “We all did what we had to do.”

“And that’s why I don’t deserve anything now,” Christopher muttered.

Rohan touched Christopher’s shoulder again to get his attention. “Christopher, you didn’t have to admit all that right now.”

“Had to do it sometime. And you had to know who you were helping,” Christopher said stiffly.

“Christopher, I’m helping the type of man who owns the mistakes he’s made and accepts the consequences of them,” Rohan said. “That is a man I will help.”

Christopher gave him a tight smile. “It’s insane of me to have said all this. Quite illogical. I shouldn’t be saying anything. I should have been quiet and hoped that Finn’s good nature would never have revealed what I am.”

“But you didn’t,” Rohan said with a faint smile. “It’s going to be all right. Once you’re up to it… we should talk about whether we can get Miles out of there, too.”

“I don’t know.” Christopher wiped tears that were streaming down his face. He wasn’t reacting to them in any other way. He was exhausted down to his bones. “Even if we got him physically away, I think his mind will still imprison him.”

“We shall see. But, from now on, you are a member of this household,” Rohan assured him.

Christopher just nodded.

Rohan turned back to Finn. The look on Finn’s face had Rohan’s heart swelling in his chest. It was such pride and love and respect. It blazed through him. He found himself standing up straighter.

“Thank you,” Finn repeated.

“There is no need for thanks,” Rohan told him. Then he gestured to the Luminus. “Has your father relented in his anger towards me a little? Letting you speak to me is a step forward.”

Finn’s face flashed with dismay. “He--he doesn’t know I’m doing this. It’s night here. He’s asleep.”

Rohan’s hopes were immediately dashed. He had hoped that Thalanil was thawing. But evidently not. Tearlach snorted. Leonid cast him a dirty look. He shrugged his shoulders.

“Will you get in trouble for doing this then, Finn?” Leonid asked.

“Other than his disappointment that I have disobeyed him? No. He’s not like…” Finn grimaced. “Not like my stepfather. He is simply wrong in this. He thinks he’s protecting me, but he’s not.”

“Every day I’ve been looking for--for a way through to you,” Rohan told him earnestly.

“You mustn’t do that, Rohan.” Finn shook his head. “He would see it as an act of war if you were to come here.”

“He has no right to keep you imprisoned there,” Rohan gritted out, his heart flaring with pain.

"No, he doesn't, but we both know how he sees things right now. I'm talking to him. I'm making a case. He's not cruel. He's not without feeling. If he understands the suffering in Rirea, I think I can convince him to let me go back and forth between Rirea and the Empire, but I also hope to convince him to help Rirea himself," Finn said.

"Really? You think that Thalanil cares about what happens beyond his Wall?" Tearlach chuckled darkly.

Finn's green eyes flickered to Tearlach, noticing the Achuvien king for the first time. "Who are you?"

Rohan glared at the Achuvien king. "Finn, this is King Tearlach, monarch of the Achuvien Kingdom."

Finn's forehead furrowed for a moment, but then cleared as if he recognized the name at least slightly. "Whatever you may know of my father, his heart is open to me."

"Yes, I am betting he adores you. Treasures you. Intends to give you everything you could ever want… that *he* feels is good for you," Tearlach said with a steady smile. "He may even seem to *soften* to your entreaties, but he will *never* do as you ask."

Finn's eyes widened and he stepped back from the Luminus as if Tearlach's words struck him. Rohan reached out again as if he could catch Finn's hand and draw him back. But Finn came back on his own.

"You're wrong," Finn said firmly.

"But you know I'm not. He has everything he wants and needs on that side of the Wall. Why risk it for *mortals*?" Tearlach shrugged. "Our lifespans are but candle flames in a gale, soon snuffed out. How can such small, flickering flames count? They *don't*."

"I had no idea you were such an expert on King Thalanil," Rohan said coolly. "The Achuviens and the Empire have never warred."

"Not yet." Tearlach gave an icy smile. "I hope you will not take this the wrong way, dear Rohan, but though Rirea is a buffer zone between my kingdom and the Empire, your kingdom is… well, never going to be a deterrent to the Fae who will eventually want to take their land back. They will burn through Rirea without a second thought and be at my border."

Rohan grimaced. Leonid's hands were fisted at his sides. But was Tearlach wrong?

"Well, I should let you get back to catching up with dear Finn," Tearlach said, surprising him. But he was grateful the other king was leaving. "I wish to bathe and sup."

At that moment the door to his antechambers opened and Rohan could see Serxio and several servants scurrying about with platters of food and countless bottles of drink. They moved in what seemed like twice the speed as normal. It was only when they stepped into the room that their movements were normal again. He realized it was the time effect caused by the Luminus. Leonid had to steady Serxio as the foppish lord nearly fell over.

"Good lord, what was that?" Serxio glanced back at the door and saw the other servants still outside, moving at double speed. "What's going on?"

"Time difference caused by the Luminus," Rohan explained.

"I dare say! Quite marvelous! And, oh! Finn! You're there!" Serxio exclaimed as he caught sight of the young man.

"Serxio!" Finn called with great warmth. "I'm so happy to see you."

“And you as well! We have so much to tell you and I bet you have so much to tell us!” Serxio cried.

“We do, but…” Rohan couldn’t help the faint smile on his lips. “I need you to do one more thing.”

Serxio’s face fell. “But I just got back from doing the last thing and Finn’s right there--”

“I’m not leaving, Serxio. I promise,” Finn told him.

“Buck up, Serxio! You’re needed!” Leonid slapped the foppish lord’s back.

“That hurts when you do that, you know?” Serxio sniffed.

“Aw, you’re tougher than that!” Leonid chuckled.

“I promise we won’t start without you, but King Tearlach and his people must be situated,” Rohan told him.

Serxio’s eyebrows lifted. Rohan wondered if the foppish young lord was thinking about getting some gossip from Tearlach’s people. A bright smile formed on Serxio’s face.

Definitely looking for gossip,

“Of course, my king!” Serxio bowed. He turned to King Tearlach. “I have the perfect place for you. It overlooks the ocean.”

SWEET NOTHINGS

"*Prince* Finrael Ravenspar. Prince *Finrael* Ravenspar!" Serxio said his name as though it tasted like fine wine. "Prince Finrael *Ravenspar*. I like it!"

Finn laughed and scrubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. "I believe my full name is much longer than that, but not even I remember it."

They had been talking for hours, filling each other in on everything that had happened since they had been apart. Finn was still reeling at what they had told him about the undead. What was Marikoth planning? And, also, now that he knew this information how could he tell his father about it without revealing his use of the Luminus? Thalanil might react badly to Finn disobeying him rather than focusing on what Marikoth was doing. And then there was Tearlach. He didn't like that king at all. It wasn't just because of his disbelief that Thalanil could be convinced to help Rirea, but there was something about the way he *looked* at Rohan that he didn't like.

Maybe I'm just jealous.

Leonid wiped his mouth after taking a gulp of beer. "I still can't get over that you ride dragons now."

"*Wyverns*. My father has ridden a dragon and he says they're quite a bit different. Quite a bit larger," Finn said and he glanced upwards.

The wyverns were sleeping now, or so it seemed from the lack of roars, but he could still smell their fiery scent. Silver Soul was up there and he wondered when he would meet her. It wasn't an *if*, it was a *when.*

He looked back through the Luminus at his lover, friends and stepbrother. Serxio, Leonid and Rohan were seated around the Luminus, eating and drinking, while Christopher had curled up on a couch, cradling his injured arm against his chest. Finn wished he were there with them. He could imagine taking bites of cheese from Rohan's fingers, sharing his wine then leaning his head against one of those broad shoulders. His body actually *ached* at the loss of the Rirean king.

"I have to admit that it's strange to hear you call Thalanil father," Leonid said a little grimly.

"I know he was awful when you all met," Finn recalled, wincing.

"He was very angry," Serxio said.

"I am simply glad he did not take that out on you," Rohan said firmly.

"He didn't. He's been… very kind and loving. He was shocked and upset then, but he recovered quickly," Finn assured them.

"I'm gladder than I can say about that," Rohan said.

"He's not… not what you think," Finn said awkwardly.

"How so?" Serxio asked, perking up.

Finn wanted to tell Rohan what Thalanil had said about his parents, about who had really killed them and why. But he wanted to do so when they were alone. He wanted Rohan to be able to process the information first and then relay it to others when or if he saw fit. Their gazes met and he saw Rohan tilt his head to the side, reading Finn's reticence.

So all Finn said was, "It's hard to explain. He's both more reachable and more remote than I expected."

"I often wonder what it is like for beings who live forever to deal with mortals," Leonid mused. "We likely seem as strange to them as they to us."

"I think that's true. How's Christopher doing? He's been quiet for a little while," Finn asked to divert the conversation.

Rohan looked at someone out of the Luminus' range. "Your stepbrother is deeply asleep."

"In addition to that poor arm of his, he's cradling a loaf of bread. Now that's my kind of person," Serxio remarked as he finished off a bit of cake and sighed in contentment.

"Christopher has always been… different. Very smart. Very capable. But he's had bad examples set for him. No one to give him good guidance," Finn tried to explain. His stepbrother reminded him very much of Marikoth, but Marikoth before he was hardened into the evil, twisted being he was now. Christopher still had a chance to become a good man. "He needs people around him to teach him the right way to use his gifts."

"We'll figure something out for him. Perhaps a tutor? And then perhaps he could go to the university?" Rohan murmured.

"I'm glad there is one person, at least, in that household who has apologized to you!" Serxio cried. "Really and truly, though, you and Christopher haven't said much about it, it sounds awful."

"It was awful. I'm not sure… I'm not sure how I feel about an apology. My stepbrothers were not kind to me. Christopher was not exaggerating when he said that. But they were taught bad lessons and we all feared Gerard," Finn admitted with a grimace. "I always saw them as my tormentors, but now I see that it was not so clear cut. Not exactly."

"Well, he's paid for some of his bad acts," Leonid remarked.

"And he seems eager to repay more," Serxio added.

"I hope he can help you with the potion you found at Marikoth's camp," Finn said. "I still cannot believe what Marikoth is doing. All those poor people."

"What's frightening about it--besides the obvious--is that Marikoth is able to drain his enemies and then make them into his soldiers." Serxio shivered. "It's just so wrong!"

"Yes, yes, it is." Finn chewed his inner cheek.

"But I was very brave in the face of it all," Serxio said. "My daggers took out many of the undead."

"It was his majesty who kept us all from being killed, Serxio. You just poked the undead with your little knives and made them more angry," Leonid teased.

"Yes, I angered them, which made them reckless! That made them easier prey for Rohan," Serxio declared.

"Indeed, I couldn't have done it without you, Serxio," Rohan agreed loyally.

Finn's lips twitched in amusement. He missed their banter. He wondered what it would be like to live in the castle with them. To be with Rohan day and night and see their friends whenever they liked! If he were there, he could make sure that Christopher was on the right path. He might even be able to convince Miles to leave

Gerard. He would ensure that Magna, Jacob and Emmott were taken care of. And the one thing he would most definitely do is make Gerard afraid. His stepfather would never raise a hand to anyone again once Finn was done with him. The raven let out a *caw* that sounded like a chuckle.

There was some unspoken communication among Rohan, Serxio and Leonid as his two friends suddenly stood up. Leonid brushed crumbs off his chest while Serxio neatly folded his napkin.

"Well, I have some duties to attend to after I take that young man to his bed." Leonid nodded towards a still sleeping Christopher.

"And there is a new lady in waiting that I promised to stargaze with," Serxio sighed in happiness.

Leonid stared hard at the foppish young lord. "You are *not* breaking another young woman's heart by leading her on!"

"What? Me? Never! I never lead anyone on. I am quite clear in my intentions. That I am irresistible is just the burden I must carry." Serxio had splayed one hand against the center of his chest.

"Your burden? Your burden?! What about their hearts? As part of my duty as a Guardsman, I think my patrol may take me by your stargazing location tonight. Many, many times," Leonid growled.

Serxio looked quite alarmed at this idea."We won't be in a public part of the castle!"

"Oh, don't you worry about that! I'll *find* you," Leonid said.

"That sounds like a threat!" Serxio looked affronted.

Leonid wagged a finger under the foppish young lord's nose. "It's a *promise*."

With Serxio still clucking about privacy and his honor and Leonid *promising* him company tonight, the two men moved out of sight. Finn heard Leonid grunt softly as he lifted Christopher up. Serxio waved as the three of them left the room. Silence fell in their wake. Only the snap and crackle from the fire could be heard. He met Rohan's gaze, which was now fixed upon him.

"We're finally *alone*," Rohan said with a soft laugh. "I love them dearly and I couldn't deny them seeing you, but I have to admit I was counting down the minutes until they left."

Finn smiled at him fondly. "I've missed you so much, Rohan. I can't tell you the number of times I've thought: oh, I can't wait to share this with Rohan! Or, Rohan will understand this! Or, if only Rohan were here, I could accomplish this or that!"

"It sounds to me like you are handling yourself well under the circumstances," Rohan said. "I am not surprised. You are one of the bravest people I know."

"Not so brave as you." Finn shook his head. He bit his lower lip. "Earlier I mentioned that Father isn't what I expected or what I've been told."

"So you said. I got a sense that you wanted to say more, but to me, privately."

"Yes, because, you see, I asked Father about your parents. I had to know if he'd hurt them," Finn said and swallowed.

Rohan went still. "Oh?"

Finn let out a breath. "I realize that this is only his word. He *could* be lying, but I do not think so."

"What did he say?" Rohan asked. His eyes flickered all over Finn's face, trying to read in his features what he was going to tell him.

"He said that… *Marikoth* approached them and told them about their Aeturnal heritage," Finn said and plucked at the front of his tunic. The words were hard and heavy to say. "Marikoth offered them a deal."

"And we all know how well those go for non-Fae," Rohan murmured.

Finn nodded. He drew in a breath and continued, “If they would take his side against Thalanil, once Marikoth was on the throne of the Empire, he would grant them more land, more fertile land, that had once been part of the Aeturnal’s holdings.”

Rohan closed his eyes tightly for a moment. His voice sounded pained as he said, “Go on.”

“Your parents were the ones to request the meeting with Thalanil on the Twilgate Cliffs. Father thought… thought it was to betray him, but they brought no Guard and he found that odd,” Finn rushed out. “But I think they asked to meet there because it was outside of the castle, away from everyone, so that they could speak honestly with him about Marikoth. I believe, if they had ever even agreed to the deal, they thought better of it and wanted to warn Thalanil about his brother.”

“Your good heart, Finn,” was all that Rohan said.

“But Marikoth found them anyway. He attacked Father, but Father was able to block him and to injure him so Marikoth…” Finn wet his lips. Rohan had seen what a draining could do. Not of a person though. But he had seen Finn’s ability. He loathed to associate that with what happened to Rohan’s parents. “So Marikoth…”

“Drained them to heal himself?” Rohan asked.

“Father did try to stop him, but... it was over so quickly.” Finn shook his head.

Silence fell again with just the comforting sounds of the fire in the background. Finn looked up at Rohan. The Rirean king’s gaze was distant. He was clearly thinking, remembering, and trying to determine what he believed.

“Uncle Hugues would not let me see the bodies. Their caskets were closed to everyone. They were said to be so disfigured… that seeing them like that would be nightmare-inducing. But maybe that’s not why. Maybe the state they were in would have revealed that they had been drained,” Rohan finally said. “Which means my uncle would have recognized how they died.”

“But then he would have to know of Marikoth and Death Magic!” Finn pointed out. “He would have known that Thalanil couldn’t have killed them. But… but then why would he lie about that?”

“He knew we were Aeturnals. He knew about my gift. I’ve been reading about the Aeturnals and Death Mages as I said. I got those books from him,” Rohan explained. “And… my parents wouldn’t have made any decision as to Marikoth’s offer *without* talking to my uncle. He was their advisor just like he is mine.”

Finn’s eyes widened as he saw where Rohan’s mind was taking him. “You think… you think your uncle knew about the offer and… and Marikoth’s betrayal?”

“Yes, and maybe he’s still working with Marikoth. Maybe he still thinks if we bring down the Wall that Marikoth will still reward us… or *him*,” Rohan looked and sounded bleak. “Maybe he is still seeking revenge on a rival, on Thalanil, because he lost your mother to him.”

“Lost my mother…”

Rohan focused on him. “He was in love with your mother, but she loved Thalanil and rejected him.”

“I had no idea!” Finn blinked, shocked that he had such another close connection to Rohan all this time and yet hadn’t known.

“Neither did I.” Rohan shaded his eyes with one hand for a moment.

“He would lie to you all this time?” Finn could hardly believe such treachery.

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything about him anymore,” Rohan admitted and he seemed like a lost child for a moment.

“Rohan, you’re not alone in this,” Finn told him, trying to put all his love in his voice. “I am with you. I will always be with you.”

Rohan lifted his head. “Oh, Finn, I want you now more than ever, but I am glad you are safe behind the Wall. King Tearlach is just one of the royals who are coming to Rirea for a summit. The monarchs of Bolan and Sultane are also coming. We four will hopefully forge an alliance to deal with Marikoth.”

The very thought of Rohan anywhere in Marikoth’s presence filled him with absolute terror. Marikoth was seemingly unable to drain Finn, but he could drain Rohan. The only chance Rohan and the others actually had against Marikothm without his father’s help, was if Rohan was filled with power.

If I fill him with power, he will be able to wield Lightbringer like the sword of a god, not just the sword of a king.

Finn looked at him closely. “They’re all human, Rohan. Only you aren’t. Your magical abilities are the only chance against him, I think. How much power do you have?”

Rohan’s eyes fell from his. “I still have… some from when we were last together.”

“Some is not enough against Marikoth,” Finn said firmly. He shook his head and paced in front of the Luminus. “You need me there. I can drain life and give it to you. Only then can we go up against Marikoth. And I’m not even sure if that’s enough!”

Marikoth had so much experience compared to Finn. He understood the ins and outs of being a Death Mage. Finn did not. And his father was determined he never learned.

But I have to learn. Marikoth is not content any longer to sit in his blind and wait until Father comes to him. He’s going to destroy Rirea and kill all its people, Finn thought frantically.

The raven cocked its head as it looked at him. Was there some amusement in its blue-white eyes?

“Finn, Finn, please, calm yourself,” Rohan soothed.

Finn’s hands flew up into the air. All the repressed anxiety burst forth from him. “How can I?! Father expects me to just sit here, learning Fae, and feasting while people are suffering? While you and my friends are in danger? It’s madness, Rohan!”

“He wants to keep you safe,” Rohan guessed.

“What good is being safe if you lose everyone you love?” Finn asked then he flushed as he realized what he had said. He had just told Rohan he loved him. “I--I do… I do…”

“I love you, Finn,” Rohan said.

Finn closed his eyes and just bathed in those words. He’d heard them from his mother, of course. Jacob, Magna and Emmott had told him them as well and he had eagerly spoken them back. But hearing them from Rohan had him feeling like he was flying again. And it made their distance all the more unbearable.

“Father thinks I’ll forget you,” Finn whispered. “But I never will. I must convince him of this. Or I will force Tyreon to let me through the Wall!”

“How is the fluffy bastard?” Rohan asked with an amused smile.

Finn let out snort. “He’s a father. His pups are so adorable. They are balls of fluff themselves. I can’t wait for you to meet them. You have to meet them.”

Of course, those words held so much more than they said on the surface.

Rohan nodded. “I look forward to that.”

“I will change Father’s mind. I will get to you. You are not alone,” Finn said these lines as if they were a mantra.

“I believe you,” Rohan said. He gestured for Finn to come nearer the Luminus, which Finn eagerly did. He wished he could crawl through it to get to Rohan. “I want to see your face, Finn. I want to drink it in.”

Finn obliged him even as he memorized Rohan’s handsome visage. “What would we do if I were there, Rohan? Right now. If I were there in your rooms and we were alone?”

A slow, sensual smile appeared on Rohan’s full lips. “Oh, what would we *not* do is more the question.”

Heat speared through Finn. He licked his lips as they were suddenly dry. “Tell me… in detail what we would do.”

Rohan licked his own lips. “The rooms would be lit only by firelight and moonlight. I would have already shown you every inch of this place so that you would know it well. For these would be your rooms too.”

“Would they?” Finn breathed.

“Of course. They already are.” Rohan wetted his lips and continued, “I would take you to the bedroom. The bed would be piled with pillows and furs. The sheets would be perfumed with jasmine and juniper.”

“I can almost feel the warmth of them.” Finn wrapped his arms around his chest and pretended they were Rohan’s arms.

“I would strip the fine silk I clothed you in. Such beautiful clothes for my beloved,” Rohan murmured.

Finn’s fingers moved along the silk of his tunic now. He wished that Rohan had given it to him. He did not feel shame any longer at the thought of being naked with him, “And would I get to strip you? It would only be fair.”

“It would. So we would be naked together. The moonlight would be streaming in the windows. The stars would be glittering down upon us. And I would put my hands on your shoulders,” Rohan said.

Finn swore he felt their light weight on his skin.

“I would run them down your arms. Allowing my fingers to linger in the softest, most tender spots,” Rohan murmured.

“You would tickle me?” Finn laughed.

“Yes, just a little.” That brilliant smile appeared and warmed Finn like the sun. “And then I would kiss where I have touched you. My hands would move to your chest and pinch your nipples until they peaked into dark pink nubs.”

“Ohhhhh,” Finn swallowed. “Would you… would you… with your mouth… suck them?”

“With pleasure. Like two sweet mouthfuls of ice cream,” Rohan promised.

Finn’s nipples tightened just hearing about it. “And what would you let me do?”

“Anything you wanted.”

“What do you like?” Finn asked.

“I would like you to kiss me here.” Rohan indicated the hollow at his throat.

Finn could almost taste Rohan’s skin. The salt and musk and faint hint of leather from the armor he often wore. Saliva filled his mouth and he swallowed deeply.

“And then I would beg you to kiss all the way down…” Rohan drew a finger down the center of his chest and stopped just above his groin.

“I would go lower,” Finn offered.

“Would you?”

Finn nodded. “On my knees and take you into my mouth.”

Rohan’s eyes fluttered shut. “I can feel it. Feel *you*.”

“I can taste you. That earthy taste of you. Nothing tastes as good,” Finn murmured.

“Your tongue would press up against the bottom of my cock. Your throat is like a furnace. Hot and wet and tight,” Rohan said.

“You’re so hard in my mouth. I can feel you trembling. Your hands are in my hair. You’re guiding me how fast or slow you want me to go,” Finn whispered. “And I want to please you so desperately.”

“Everything you do--everything you *are*--pleases me, Finn.”

“As do you, Rohan.” Finn tightened his hold on himself. “I swallow you when you cum. You fill me with your heat. Your life force. I am transfixed and transformed by your seed.”

“My legs give out as I give you all I am,” Rohan murmured. “We fall into bed. You on top of me. All silken limbs. My hands go to your cock.”

Finn trembled as his cock hardened further in his pants. He could imagine the heat and strength of Rohan’s hand on him.

“I stroke you. Slow and firm. My thumb smooths over the head of your cock. You get wet. It makes it easier for me to slide my hand up and down,” Rohan told him.

Finn shivered and resisted the urge to rub himself. He couldn’t cum in his pants. The staff would know. He couldn’t cum here, because his father would then know he’d been here. No, he had to control himself. He had to *wait*. He’d be better prepared next time.

“I move faster because you’re shaking with need. Your hips thrust back and forth helplessly,” Rohan said.

“We kiss. You swallow my cries. I cling to you,” Finn’s voice was hoarse with need.

“And when you cum, I hold you. I keep you close to me. I feel the hot streams of your cum splash my belly,” Rohan said.

Finn moaned and clutched at his cock, squeezing it so he didn’t really orgasm. But he would remember this when he got back to his rooms. He would replay it again and again before letting himself orgasm. He leaned heavily against the Luminus, but it easily bore his weight. They both were quiet then. Breathing through their arousal.

“When will we see each other in person again?” Finn asked, sounding forlorn.

“I have been seeking the tree with leaves of glass. It is said if that tree is chopped down that the Wall will vanish,” Rohan said.

“You mustn’t do that. Father will take it as an act of war. And though I love you more than my own life, Rohan. I could never forgive myself if my desire for you led to others’ deaths,” Finn said.

“I love you just the same.” Rohan slowly nodded. “I know that your father is not my enemy. It would be wrong to take down the Wall. But I… I long for you.” His voice was hoarse with emotion, “It is like a part of me is *missing*. My eyes search for you in every room. When I wake I reach across the bed, seeking you and your warmth. Sometimes I swear I hear your voice. I tell myself that someday these things will not be solely in my imagination or tricks of the light. You will be with me and we will never be parted again.”

Finn closed his eyes tightly for a moment. Tears burned behind them. But he forced himself to open them. He didn’t want to miss a moment of Rohan’s image being before him.

“It is the same for me,” Finn finally told him, his heart beating heavily in his chest. He touched the Luminus over where Rohan’s cheek was. “I will find a way to come to you. One that will not lead to death for others.”

Rohan slowly nodded. “I believe in you, Finn. I believe in you and I love you. I will wait for you, no matter how long it takes.”

TREASURED TEACHER

Finn and Lord Camrys walked together through the streets of Aymar. Two royal guards accompanied them at a discreet distance that would let them "defend" Finn if necessary, but not so close as to interfere with Finn's sense of privacy. Or that was the idea anyways, but Finn was keenly aware of the powerful Mages.

The sun spilled over them like liquid gold. The sky was a peerless blue. The white stone of Aymar's streets was warm and inviting. It made Finn want to simply wander all day with no destination in mind. Aymar was in so many ways a *dream*.

The people were dressed in rich, jeweled colors and seemed to give off their own illumination as they passed between sunlight and shadow. Though Finn was missing Rohan dearly, he was buoyed by their time together the night before and could enjoy the day.

He was also happy that Lord Camrys had not suggested they sit in the garden and conjugate verbs! Apparently, his father had spoken to his tutor and explained that Finn learned better with practical applications of the language. So they were headed to the market where they would practice the Fae words for the vibrant fruits and vegetables there, not to mention all of the magical trinkets.

Finn had shyly asked his father for some pocket money to perhaps buy a few things. When he was very young, his mother had always given him a few pence to purchase candy or fruit when they went into Dawnmore. That was all he was looking for this time.

"A young man must always have some coins in his pocket!" she'd told him with a laugh and a hug.

Of course, his stepfather had stopped that practice. He'd never been paid for his work. If he was ever trusted with coin it was to go pick up a previously agreed upon item and he was given the *exact* amount that was owed. Not a pence more! So it had been a little nerve wracking to make that request of Thalanil. But since his father would not let him work at all, let alone for coin--and he understood why as a prince, he did not labor in the fields or in a shop--he hoped Thalanil would agree to let him have a little something.

Thalanil's eyes had widened and then an easy smile had crossed his lips. "Of course, Finrael! I should have arranged for this without you having to ask."

His father didn't carry money upon him. Finn supposed that a king was supposed to be beyond paying for things himself. Though he guessed that Rohan had coin on him, but Rohan was often traveling or hunting incognito.

A female Fae dressed in brilliant gold had been called to the breakfast table after Finn had made his request. She bowed low so that her head was almost touching her knees.

"Finrael, this is Sylmare Uridithas, Lady High Treasurer," his father had said.

Finn blinked. “Oh, it is a pleasure to meet you!” He turned alarmed eyes on his father. “I just meant some pocket money. A few coins to buy some small things. Not--not something that needs the Lady High Treasurer!”

He was surprised when Sylmare chuckled and said, “Ah, Prince Finrael, you are as unassuming and humble as many have said. But your father did not call me here just to give you pocket money. Though I will do that as well. But to have you understand the scope of your wealth.”

“Scope of… *my* wealth?” Finn blinked. “You mean my father’s wealth surely!”

“As my son, you are entitled to various properties, jewels and other treasures.” His father covered Finn’s nearest hand with his own.

“I had no idea,” Finn breathed, feeling overwhelmed as the Lady High Treasurer set down a book upon the table before him and opened it to the first page.

“First, let us discuss your lands,” she said in a rich, unctuous voice.

Finn was stunned to learn that he had estates all throughout the Empire. There were farms, castles and whole villages that were his. Right now they were being managed by his father’s staff, but he would be able to choose his own if he did not wish to continue with them. He had mines full of precious metals and gemstones. He owned woods where the finest staves were made. Not to mention vineyards where some of his favorite wines were created.

“Father… these are your lands! I--I would hardly know what to do with them!” Finn admitted.

“I have plenty more to my own name,” his father chuckled, stroking Finn’s cheek with affection. “But do not be overwhelmed. You will learn how to rule and manage these places, though I am guessing through your stewardship of Tanglewood, you have some idea.”

Finn nodded. He thought of Magna, Jacob and Emmott then. Like the people who lived on his lands in the Empire, they had been a part of Tanglewood. His stepfather had run them off when it was he who should have been gone. Finn had failed them. He didn’t even know where they were now. He’d have to ask Rohan to look for them. But did the Rirean king not have enough matters to contend with? He did, but those three were like family to Finn and he wanted to make sure they were okay. Now he had many individuals whose names he did not know who were counting on him, too.

The Lady High Treasurer turned to yet another page of the book then. “This is one of my favorite listings. All of your jewels, Prince Finrael.”

Finn’s lips parted in shock as she read off descriptions of them and looked at the inked sketches beside each listed piece. There were jeweled crowns with names like the Star Aflame and White Star Rising. There were circlets of purest silver, gold and platinum enchanted by the Aeturnals to perform wondrous magics.

“You will wear your first crown--the Evenstar--when you are crowned this summer,” his father explained.

“I will wear… a crown,” Finn said, trying to get used to the idea.

Thalanil and the Lady High Treasurer shared a smile at his reaction.

Then there were the rings and necklaces and bracelets. Marvelous rings set with every stone imaginable from deepest amethyst to shining diamond. Each one was enchanted, too. Some could conjure fire or ice or a storm. Others could summon a creature of smoke and flame to serve as a familiar. Finn thought of the raven then who had so objected to being thought of as one of these magical beings.

The Lady High Treasurer gestured to one of her associates who stood, head bowed, by the doors to the dining room. They carried over a rectangular box that was finely carved with the image of a wyvern curled all along the hinged lid. They

set this down on the table too. The Lady High Treasurer flipped the lid back and there, nestled in individual silk beds, were some of those jeweled rings.

"Pick some to wear," his father urged with a delicate wave of his hand.

Finn, who had never worn jewelry in his life, was a bit awed by the opportunity to do so. And yet he looked askance at some of the more elaborate rings that were crusted with jewels. But there was one ring, a very simple ring, set with a diamond that drew him. The silver band was made to look like a bird clutching the square cut gem in its talons. Finn carefully lifted the ring up. When his father saw his choice, he nodded as if pleased.

"That is Amarathar, Light in the Darkness. Not only will it light your way when you need it, but it also is said to have the ability to destroy the undead through its purity," his father said.

"Destroy the undead?" Finn knew that his eager tone had been strange, because his father lifted an eyebrow and appeared amused.

"Have you seen any skeletons wielding swords or bows you wish to turn back to lifeless bone?" his father asked.

And Finn had almost told him then of Marikoth's turning the Rireans into the undead. But that would have revealed he had used the Luminus against Thalanil's wishes and spoken to, of all people, *Rohan*. This could not be done. Not yet.

Before they had ended their session with the Luminus the night before, he and Rohan had agreed to strategize about how Finn would bring up Rirea's issues with his father and his desire to be with Rohan. Though the time difference would make it difficult to plan these meetings, they had agreed that Finn should try to get to the Luminus every night. With the Luminus being in Rohan's quarters, they hoped they would find one another and determine the exact time difference.

"No, I suppose not. But how does it work?" Finn asked, wondering if there was some way he could bribe Tyreon to take the ring to Rohan through the Wall.

His father slid the ring onto Finn's right pointer finger. "Like all magic, it is a matter of will. Focus on the ring. Focus on how it feels on your finger. Is it cool? Warm? Too tight or too loose?"

Finn did that. The ring was perfectly sized. It was cool and he could feel the difference between the band and the jewel. For a moment, he thought he saw a gleam of light in the center of the gem.

"That's good, Finrael! You are calling out the light." His father waved a hand through the air and the candles all guttered. Darkness, other than the illumination from the fire, descended. "Try again."

Finn focused on the ring once more. He felt it against his skin and imagined a spark of energy from him going into the ring. The diamond suddenly flared with a silvery white light that grew in brilliance until it filled the whole room. Finn let out a delighted laugh.

"It worked!" he cried.

"Of course, it did," his father chuckled again.

With another wave of his hand, all the candles burst into flame again. Finn allowed the light from Amarathar to dim until it was only the faintest gleam in the gem's center. He ran his fingers over the raven and thought he felt the wings move. He jerked his fingers back but the raven was still.

"Were all of these things made by the Aeturnals?" Finn asked as he gestured at the rings.

"Enchanting items was their strength," his father said carefully.

Both of them knew that Rohan was an Aeturnal. Finn wondered if Rohan could be taught to enchant things. With him feeding Rohan power, he imagined that the

Rirean king could create masterworks.

So much has been lost--is being lost--because of fear and prejudice, Finn thought sadly. *But maybe that can be changed.*

Another box was brought over. This one contained necklaces with pendants. Silver, gold and platinum chains of all lengths with pendants shaped in the form of animals or symbols studded with jewels.

"Pick one to wear today," his father urged. "They are all yours and far more than just these. But I wanted you to have a selection. You did well in your choices, Lady High Treasurer," his father said.

The woman bowed low again. "I am honored you think so, your majesty."

Finn reached for the box and let his right hand hover above the necklaces. He felt one tug at him. He blindly followed that *tug* and lifted up a silver necklace. There were two pendants attached to the silver strand. One was a delicate bird's feather also done in silver. The other was a deep blue stone.

"Ah! The Eye of the Raven!" His father beamed and took the necklace from him. He unclasped it and gestured for Finn to turn around so that he could put it on him. "This will allow you to see what is happening to those you love when they are in danger, even if you are hundreds of miles from them."

The cool metal against his skin felt good. As soon as his father closed the clasp, Finn's fingers went to the feather and stone. They both stayed cool even as he stroked their surfaces. Finn slipped the necklace underneath his tunic.

"How do I use it?" Finn asked.

"The visions will just come to you if someone you care for is in danger and needs your help," his father told him.

Finn decided he would never take it off. He turned back to the Lady High Treasurer. She had a pouch of coins that she placed in front of him.

"I believe you wanted a little spending money as well," she said.

Finn looked inside and his mouth went dry. There were dozens of gold coins in there. This was more money than Tanglewood would see in a month. It was more money than he had ever held in his life. And this was considered "a little spending money"? His life truly had changed.

"I have included coins of lower denomination in case you wish to purchase some smaller items," she assured him when he glanced up at her.

He swallowed, but then realized what this meant. He could *help* people. He had wealth beyond imagining and he could use it for good. So instead of objecting, Finn just thanked both of them.

"Father, this is beyond generous," Finn told him. "I promise to use all that you have given me as wisely as possible."

Thalanil stroked Finn's hair. "There is so much more I would do for you, Finrael. This is just the start."

Though his father had determined to take a very active role in his schooling, Lord Camrys was still to be his full-time tutor. So while his father met with his advisors, Finn and Lord Camrys walked the town with guards in tow.

"It is a beautiful day. Hot and fine. It is good we are out in the morning, though, as the midday sun will be a little strong, I think," Lord Camrys remarked.

Finn, whose darker complexion kept him safer from the sun's rays than Lord Camrys' fairer one, did agree. Right now the sun was pleasant and the air was warm, but not warm enough to sap their energy.

"This is the street where I saw the invisibility cloaks!" Finn enthused, remembering that first journey through Aymar, following after Tyreon.

“While there are some fine things in the market, I am betting that your family vault has better!” Lord Camrys smiled. “But perhaps as a plaything it won’t be so bad.”

“Yes… as a plaything.”

He had thought about buying one so that he could more easily sneak through the palace to the Luminus. He doubted that such cloaks would fool his father, but they might a servant or two. And with the weight of his coin purse by his side he knew he could afford one. Thankfully, Lord Camrys seemed to think he would use it as a joke. All the better.

But while he was looking for that shop, his eyes scanned the crowd. There were several fruit sellers on either side of the street. There was one hawker selling these bright, orange globes that gushed purple juice. The fruit was artfully stacked into pyramids on a table where the legs were hidden by a flowered cloth. The hawker stood in front of the table with his back to it. A slender child’s hand reached up from below the table. The flowered cloth hid the rest of their body. That hand quested for the fruit and grasped one of the fruit at the bottom of the pyramid.

Oh, no, Finn thought, knowing what was going to happen even before it did.

His father would have been able to stop the fruit from toppling onto the ground most likely, but he could just stare on in horror as the child-thief pulled that one fruit out and caused the entire stock of orange balls to tumble onto the ground. The hawker spun around the moment some of his fruit hit the backs of his calves. He let out a cry of dismay, which soon turned to anger as the child awkwardly dashed out from underneath the table, bringing the cloth with her as she tried to run away. The hawker leaped upon her, crushing her against the stone street painfully, while the stolen, forbidden fruit escaped from her fingers and rolled away.

“Oh dear, that will get her beaten for sure,” Lord Camrys breathed out. “And she’s likely just hungry. But with all these refugees flooding the place, the palace hasn’t yet found a way to feed and house them all.”

Refugees… refugees like Ryleth and the other villagers, Finn thought.

The enraged hawker got up and pulled the child painfully to her feet by one arm. Her face was dirty. Her hair was matted. Her eyes were so huge with pain and fear that they dominated her small features. The hawker drew back his free hand to strike her. Finn moved before he consciously thought about it, he sprang towards them and grabbed the hawker’s wrist.

“No!” Finn shouted in Common.

The hawker snarled and spun around towards him. The man’s expression grew even darker upon seeing Finn’s face. Though Finn was dressed in the finest of silks and leathers, though he wore the Ravenspar symbol on his tunic, even though royal guards were rushing to his aid, this man saw only a *human* who deserved no respect. Finn had not yet been introduced to the people. He had not left the palace proper until today. But still, Finn felt the bloom of anger within his chest at the man’s assumption that he was *lesser* simply because he appeared *human*. The bright spark that had been absent since Rohan had left ignited immediately. Finn’s eyes narrowed.

“You dare touch me, slave?!” The hawker hissed back in Common, likely thinking Finn didn’t know the language well enough to speak it. He was right, but it wasn’t because Finn was stupid as he likely thought. “I’ll give *you* a hiding just like I will this thief! Then I’ll have both your hands cut off!”

The hawker shook the child with his other hand. She let out a cry of pain and said something in Fae, which Finn could not understand, but guessed was a plea for forgiveness and to let her go.

“You fool! This is Prince Finrael Ravenspar!” Lord Camrys shouted even as the guards were drawing their swords.

“What? No! This is a… a human scum…” The hawker, though, finally *looked* beyond Finn’s rounded ears and green eyes. His mouth opened in an “O” of panic.

“You piece of garbage! You dare speak this way to the prince?” the female guard snarled.

“My prince, let us take this man. He will be punished for his disrespect towards you,” the male guard growled, clearly eager to get his hands on the hawker.

The hawker dropped to his knees, Finn’s hand still holding his wrist, and started to plead, “Your majesty, I did not know it was you! Forgive me! Forgive me!”

Everyone around them had frozen. They were staring, openmouthed, clutching their fronts, or hunkering down in fear. Finn’s magic crackled within him. His breath frosted the air as did all of theirs. The sunlight seemed to dim.

“Lord Camrys, I want you to translate what I say so that all can understand it,” Finn said, hardly recognizing his own voice. It was darker, deeper and more commanding.

“Y-yes, of course, my prince. I will do so,” Lord Camrys murmured.

“This child is hungry. This child should have been able to come to you and ask for one of your wares instead of stealing it. She should have been given a piece of fruit by you with a smile. But she knows that you would not give her one. Even if you throw out half your store at the end of the day, you’d rather have it rot than go into the hands of those without the means to pay you,” Finn said, knowing this from his own experiences in Rirea. Perhaps the Fae were different, but he did not think so. Not by the easy way this man would have beaten this girl without concern of being stopped. “You would have beaten her instead of fed her. You would have bloodied her instead of keeping her safe. You think you can do this without consequences, because she is weak and you are strong.”

The hawker was shaking. He didn’t even lift his eyes to Finn’s face. Lord Camrys spoke his words in liquid Fae in a strong voice.

“You thought you could bloody *me* because you thought I was weak and you are strong, but you were *wrong*,” Finn said, his voice darkening.

He could feel the hawker’s life force. It was barely anything. A flickering flame on a windy hilltop. He could have snuffed it out in a moment. The cold increased and frost appeared along the man’s skin where Finn touched him. The hawker let out a cry of pain and fear. The desire to snuff him out was intense. It was like an itch he needed to scratch. Finn swallowed as his mouth was suddenly filled with saliva. He forced himself to release the man’s wrist. The hawker drew it down protectively against his chest. Instead, Finn picked up one of the fruits. He held it in his hand in front of the man’s nose.

“We have a choice about how we behave. We can treat people who we think are weaker than us with respect and generosity or we can do so with disdain and cruelty,” Finn said and he slowly started to drain the fruit of its remaining life like he had the vines in the forest. “I do not know if you are capable of caring for others. But I do know you are capable of *fear*. Next time someone comes to you for help, you will help them, because I will know if you do not.”

The fruit turned black and then turned to ash in his hand. Finn allowed the ash to sift through his fingers in front of the hawker’s face. The hawker let out a low moan of terror and then curled into a ball on the ground. Finn let the final flakes of ash drift away before he straightened to look at all of the people who stood there, pale-faced, and frightened. None of them had even glanced over when they saw the girl about to get beaten. None of them had intervened. But now he had their

undivided attention.

"This applies to all of you," Finn said coldly. "If you feed the poor and hungry, you may come to the palace to be reimbursed for your wares. I will reimburse you as I know that you, too, need coin to feed yourselves and your families. But treat the poor and hungry with violence and you will come to regret it. Remember that."

The people bowed low before Finn gestured for them to get on with their work. His shoulders slumped. He suddenly wondered if he had gone way too far in his proclamation. He was representing Thalanil, not just himself. But it was done. And he didn't really regret it. Doing this had felt both natural and unnatural. He swallowed the saliva that still flowed as he glared down at the man at his feet.

"What would you have us do with him, my prince?" the female guard asked.

"Collect all the fruit that is fit to eat and have it given to the poor," Finn instructed. "Then… pay him… what is reasonable."

"Behaving as he did with you is a death sentence, your majesty," the male guard said.

But Finn shook his head. "Even if he had known who I was, he may have a family. People who need him. I want this to be a lesson that he can learn from."

"You are too kind, my prince," Lord Camrys said with a look of distaste at the still-huddled hawker.

It was then that Finn realized the girl was still there. She was on the ground, too, but was gazing up at him through her fingers. There was something *familiar* about her.

"Finn?" she asked softly in her little voice.

"Yes, I am Finn," he answered.

Her hands lowered and she looked up at him with awe. "Finn! Finn! Rohan! Rohan!"

He recognized her then. "Jani? Jani, is that you?"

She pressed a grubby fist against her chest. "Jani!" She pointed at him. "Finn!" Then she looked about and asked, "Rohan?"

"He's back in… in Rirea. Lord Camrys, can you translate?" Finn asked.

"Of course. What would you like to say?" he asked.

"Ask her if she knows where Ryleth is," Finn requested.

The lord did not ask how he knew her or who Ryleth was, but translated with alacrity. Finn felt strange knowing that he had likely earned Lord Camrys' respect through the destructive use of his magic more than anything else.

But that is the way of power, Finn thought. *I must be just and fair with mine. Was I today?*

"Ryleth!" Jani jumped to her feet. Lord Camrys spoke to her and she nodded vigorously. "Ryleth! Ryleth!" She pointed away from the palace, beaming at him.

"She says that she can take you to this Ryleth and…" Lord Camrys frowned, "the horses? I'm not sure what she means by that."

Finn let out a laugh. "I understand!" He took Jani's hand in his. "Take me to Ryleth and the horses."

THE COST OF REFUGE

Finn had to stop himself from running ahead of Jani to get to Ryleth. But he didn't know where the Fae priestess actually was, so he had to match his steps with the little girl's. Jani was moving as fast as her little legs could carry her. But they'd been delayed in leaving the market as the fruit had to be dealt with and the hawker had to be grudgingly paid. Now he was as anxious as he could be to get to Ryleth and, of course, Sweetfire.

As they headed towards the main gate out of Aymar, the guards grew uneasy. They strode on either side of him now, not willing to hang back after what had happened with the hawker. Finn wondered if they were worried about what someone might try to do to him or what *he* might do to others. It was probably the latter. Surely, he had proven to them that he needed no protection.

"Your father agreed only that you should be in the city, my prince," Lord Camrys reminded him as he realized where they were heading. "Not outside."

"He is right, your majesty, I do not think the king would want you outside of Aymar's walls," the female guard said as she rounded in front of Finn and stopped him and Jani from going any farther.

"I'm sorry, I don't know your name," Finn said to her as they stopped just by the drawbridge that would lead outside. He remembered all too well coming in this way.

The female guard's eyes widened fractionally as if she never thought he would ask such a thing. Why would he want a lowly guard's name after all?

"I am Isarrel and this is Nylian," she said as she pointed to her companion.

"First, I should thank you for defending me as you did back there," Finn said. "I truly appreciated it."

"It didn't seem like you needed it," Nylian chuckled.

Isarrel gave him a sharp look and he appeared sheepish.

"Actually, I'm glad you think so. I'm still learning… my magic." Finn gave a brief smile. "But that is also a good place for the second thing I will say. My father did not tell you that I am limited to the palace and city beyond, did he?"

Both guards looked uncomfortable as they shot glances towards one another.

"No," Isarrel said slowly, "but we can guess what he'd like."

"Yes, I'm sure. But I just want to know if he gave either of you a *direct* order. I wouldn't ask you to ignore that," Finn told them.

Both shook their heads reluctantly.

"And you, Lord Camrys? Did he give you such an order?" Finn asked.

"No, he did not, but, Prince Finrael, it is not altogether safe outside the palace walls," Lord Camrys reminded him.

"You are correct. It is not, but as I showed you, I can handle myself," Finn said.

“Why not have the child go get this Ryleth and bring her here? Or better yet, have her come to the palace,” Lord Camrys suggested hopefully.

Finn guessed the lord would much rather be sitting in the royal gardens, sipping iced juices and nibbling sandwiches, than tromping outside Aymar’s walls where the forest was so wild and dangerous. He would have sent the lord back, but he was certain that, whatever Lord Camrys preferred, he wasn’t leaving Finn’s side unless it was a direct order. And Finn was also certain that Lord Camrys would run to his father to interfere in Finn’s plans if he was sent back to the palace on his own.

“I don’t wish to do that, because I need to see how they are living myself.” Finn put a hand on Jani’s head. She looked up at him affectionately and leaned against his leg. “If Jani is stealing, then things must be bad indeed. I know Ryleth would not encourage such behavior. Which means the people are in desperate straits. But Ryleth would likely be too proud to tell me that unless I see it with my own eyes and she can’t deny it.”

Nylian grimaced. “You’re likely right. A lot of folk have been making their way here, thinking being near the king will solve their problems, but we can’t support all of them! Though you offering to pay the merchants is a kind act.”

“I came… from nothing before finding my father. I understand what it is to be hungry and desperate and have nowhere to turn. I won’t allow that here to the extent I can help,” Finn said firmly.

“So you really want to go out there?” Isarrel asked, forehead bunched.

“Yes, Isarrel, but I promise I will keep all of you safe,” Finn told her and touched her arm briefly. He was relieved when she didn’t flinch. “And none of you will get in trouble for this.”

“I don’t know about that.” Nylian grinned. “But we’ll have a monster of a story to tell.”

“We do already,” Isarrel said, then as if remembering he was the prince, she quickly amended, “Forgive me, your majesty. It was just your actions were quite--”

“Epic. That bastard won’t raise a hand to a child again,” Nylian said without repentance. “And those others will think twice before being cruel to the poor.”

“There’s nothing to forgive. I only hope my father is not cast in any bad light because of what I did,” Finn said, rubbing the hand that had held the fruit.

His temper had gotten away from him. His hunger had flared, too, in a dangerous manner. Beyond simply wanting to make sure Ryleth and her people were alright, he needed her advice. The love story she’d translated for him just confirmed that his and Rohan’s powers were meant to be used together to establish a balance. But he needed to learn how to use his own as well.

“Okay, so we’re going out, yes?” Finn asked.

They all nodded. He turned back to Jani and indicated they should go forward once more. She smiled hugely and ran ahead, dragging Finn behind her like a kite. They passed by the station where guards were checking people and their carts into the city. The line seemed even longer and slower than it had when they had gone through it the first time.

Jani followed the path to the forest line--there was a large section of ground between the forest and the palace’s walls that was simply bare earth. Battle Mages riding sicen sent waves of red mist out onto the ground that killed anything living. But still the forest persisted in its attempts to climb Aymar’s walls and overwhelm it.

Rohan and I could stop this.

About 500-feet down the main roadway was a path that had been cut into the forest. There was evidence of the same red-misting magic used here to kill off the

vegetation. Finn guessed that this was Ryleth's doing. But even so, the vines reached towards them as they walked down it, but Finn sent out a wave of his magic, which had the grasping vines retreating in all directions.

"What happened there?" Lord Camrys asked. "Was that you?"

"I told you I'd keep you safe," Finn said over his shoulder.

The lord's eyes widened.

Jani forged ahead leading them through the winding path until the forest opened up around a pond. There were cloth tents set up and dozens of people were doing chores from darning clothes, cooking very little food around fires, and working on additional shelters. The Fae all froze when Jani appeared. Her sister, whom Finn remembered, cried out and ran towards her, scooping her up and hugging her closely. Jani spoke gaily and gestured towards them. There were shouts of surprise--and some alarm at the guards--at their appearance. But then people started to recognize him as Jani called out his name, "Finn! Finn!"

Finn's gaze swept the clearing for Ryleth. And he found her coming out of one of the tents. She immediately turned her head and caught sight of him. Shock was followed by a brilliant smile. She took in Lord Camrys and the royal guards with a lifted eyebrow, but she moved easily towards him without any hesitation. They met in the middle of the group. He surprised her--but seemingly pleasantly--by embracing her.

"Ryleth! I'm so glad I found you!" Finn enthused.

"Finn! Oh, it is *good* to see you, too. I had feared…" She broke off as she pulled back to look at him closely. Her gaze flowed over his fine clothes to Lord Camrys who stood awkwardly behind him, and finally to the royal guards who kept their palms on the hilts of their swords. "I had thought that you and the others were, ah, *returned* to Rirea."

"Rohan, Serxio and Leonid *were*," Finn said and tension filled him at mentioning their loss. "I convinced my father to send them away rather than… well, he sent them home while I stayed here."

"Your father?" Her red eyes flickered over his face. "Ah! You *are* a Ravenspar as I suspected. Our King Thalanil is--"

"My father, yes," Finn assured her. "The announcement will be spread far and wide this mid-summer when I am crowned as Prince Finrael Ravenspar."

She studied him once more then her smile grew broader. She bowed low and said, "I am glad for you, your majesty."

"Finn is *fine* and no bowing, I beg of you!" Finn told her. Seeing Lord Camrys and the two guards hanging back, but very much watching over him, he said, "Please let me introduce you to Lord Gaelyn Camrys, Royal Guard Nylian and Royal Guard Isarrel. Everyone, this is Ryleth."

"Pleasure, Ryleth. Any friend of his majesty's is one of mine." Lord Camrys gave her a practiced bow.

The guards nodded as well, but they remained on high alert.

"Please sit and enjoy our fires," Ryleth said. "We do not have much, but what little we do have, we share with you."

Finn indicated that they should leave him and Ryleth so that they could have some privacy. With reluctance, the three moved off towards the nearest fire where they were offered food and drink. Finn only turned back to Ryleth once they were out of earshot.

"When the sky darkened that day you met your father…" Ryleth winced and looked down. "I ran, Finn."

"That was a sensible reaction," Finn said, unsure where she was going with this.

But she grimaced. “I left you. I didn’t even try to help you.”

Still feeling confused, Finn said, “Seeing my father’s powers, there was nothing you could have done. Besides, I was able to calm him and no one got hurt.”

“I ran to save my skin,” she said and looked rather miserable about it.

“There was nothing you could do,” he repeated. “I was impressed by your magic, but Father’s is…”

“Far superior, yes. But I still should have tried,” she told him.

“You had everyone here to think of,” Finn reminded her. “They needed you. I’m only sorry that I didn’t get word to you earlier that I was all right. But I had no idea where you were until… well, until I saw Jani in the market.”

He knew he had to explain what happened there, but the words escaped him in that moment.

“I have so much to ask you, but I think a few people would like to speak to you first.” A mischievous smile crossed her lips as she gestured towards a section of the clearing he hadn’t noticed before.

“Oh, who--ah! The horses!” Finn cried.

Sweetfire’s head was lowered as she stuffed herself with grass. Tempest was right beside her. They kept bumping noses as they ate.

“Sweetfire! Tempest!” Finn called to the horses as he ran towards them.

The horses immediately lifted their heads, ears twitching this way and that, and then they saw him. Sweetfire let out an excited nicker. Tempest neighed even as his dark eyes looked for Rohan, or so Finn thought. He was by the horses’ sides in seconds. He wrapped his arms around Sweetfire’s neck and placed kisses on her nose. She made joyous sounds and pressed her head against him. Tempest did not want to be out of the action and nosed Finn’s side.

“Oh, I love you too, Tempest! I’ve missed you both endlessly!” Finn told the war horse as he kissed Tempest’s head, too. He alternated giving both horses kisses and strokes until all were satisfied.

“We tried to take good care of them for you,” Ryleth said. “Though Jacona was quite jealous of the love they received.”

“Where is Jacona? I’ll give her kisses, too, so long as she doesn’t try to eat me like she did Serxio!” Finn laughed.

But Ryleth’s smile dimmed. “We had to sell her. Things are… so expensive here with all the refugees. Many tried staying in the city, but they were soon tricked of their coin or robbed of it. The locals don’t outright steal but they charge any refugee ten times the price of anything. Money is already running short. People are asking if we should go back to the village, but… that would be suicide even if we could return there without your and Rohan’s help.”

Finn hadn’t regretted his actions towards the hawker, but hearing this made him glad he’d been as firm as he had been, not only to him but to those watching his fate as well.

“Oh, no, I… I’m so sorry! I had no idea…” Finn petered off then swept the group. There were no sicen left. And a few people were missing as well. “What of Thomas and Tela?”

“I would have sold Thomas, but I would not wish him on my worst enemy,” she said with a wry smile. “He left with Tela. They returned to my old order, I think. We had no way of imprisoning them here forever.”

“But Thomas killed Emma!” Finn’s cheeks flushed and his hands fisted.

“I know, but I could not exactly go to the guard myself after… well, I suppose I could have considering who you are, but I believed not,” she said. “It sickens me to think of him getting off with no punishment for his crime. But I thought I had no

good options."

Finn nodded slowly. "Well, you do now, Ryleth. My father tells me… well, he tells me that I have extensive lands. Estates and such. I don't know all of it. But I am betting that there is someplace safe--or safer--that we could send the villagers to. Where they would be taken care of, have homes and jobs. Those who would wish to go in any case."

Her eyes widened, but then she was nodding. "Of course, you would. You're a Ravenspar and the Crown Prince. But that you'd help *us* after everything that happened…"

"You're my people and you earned my trust and loyalty," he told her.

She blinked for a moment as if tears wanted to form behind her red eyes, but she held them back. Her voice, though, was full of warmth and gratefulness as she said, "Thank you, Prince Finrael."

"It's *Finn*," he reminded her lightly.

"When you behave like a prince I cannot help but call you what you are," she told him with a smile.

"I finally can help in the way I'd like. While we figure out where they should go permanently, we'll find room for them, if not in the palace, then nearby," Finn told her. He was certain his father would help him with this. He was also sure that Thalanil was not aware of how the refugees were being treated. But did his father understand why the refugees were even there? Finn's magic could help thin the extra life but he needed Rohan to store it someplace safe. "I'll make sure they are provided with food and everything they need."

"That is good of you. Truly," she said.

"Well, I am hoping that you'll do something for me in return," he told her with a crooked smile.

"Anything, my prince," she smiled as she added his honorific.

"I want you to be my teacher," he said. "I need to know everything you do about the Death Mages and the Aeturnals."

Her eyebrows rose. "But surely your father would know more than me as the Death Mages come from his bloodline."

"He might, but he's not willing to share it with me," Finn explained. "He wants to pretend I'm just a normal Mage."

Her forehead furrowed. "But your magic is completely different than mine or his. Teaching you our ways won't work very well, if at all."

"I figured as much. But he thinks if he ignores this aspect of me that it will go away," Finn admitted and scrubbed the back of his neck with one hand. "That's why I need your help."

"If your father won't teach you himself, he certainly isn't going to allow me to teach you!" She shook her head.

"Only if we tell him that you're teaching me. He hasn't said no one can teach me about it, only that he will not," Finn said.

Ryleth snorted. "Now I see the Fae in you! You are splitting hairs rather fine."

"Perhaps, but he's wrong about this and I--I see all the good I can do. I have to show him, but I can't without learning how to control my magic first," he said.

"Finn, you're asking me to betray your father's trust." She pinched the top of her nose. "And even if I was inclined to do *that*, my reputation precedes me. You weren't there when we met up with my order in the palace. Tela and Thomas have, undoubtedly, told them of my blasphemy in continuing to discuss Death Mages and the Aeturnals. They will inform the king."

“Perhaps, but--what was that? What’s going on?” Finn turned around as he thought he’d heard cries in the distance.

The horses lifted their heads as well and let out nervous neighs. Finn gasped as he saw what was causing the commotion. Tree creatures, like the one that he had faced in Ryleth’s old village, were lumbering towards the main roadway where all the refugees were packed up. But instead of there being just one or two of them, there were *hundreds* of them.

“That’s too many!” Ryleth hissed. “It will overwhelm the Battle Mages protecting the road. Many will die.”

“Then I have to help!” Finn pulled himself up onto Sweetfire’s back.

“Not just you!” Ryleth vaulted onto Tempest’s back. “We do this together!”

And the two of them were off, riding hard, and not looking back even as Lord Camrys and the guards called after them.

POWER OF A DEATH MAGE

In the Tower of Ravnos, King Thalanil Ravenspar half-listened to the wheezing, wheedling voice of Lord Reluvethel Ervyre, his long-time advisor from the north, drone on about crop yields. The amount of food produced overall was still good, but the overgrowth was slowly eating into arable land. Thalanil's gaze went to the glass doors that lead out onto the balcony that ran around the outer edge of the tower. The sunlight beamed through the sheer curtains. He could feel its warmth. It beckoned to him. For Finrael was out there.

But he was stuck *here*.

"The use of the red dust has kept the forest at bay, but it also eventually drains life from the fields, which causes crop loss and," Lord Ervyre continued, "this infertility has spread ever larger until some fields are not producing at all. It is quite--"

"What is the *solution*, Lord Ervyre?" Thalanil interrupted. "This is nothing new. Telling me about something I already know is not useful. I need *solutions*. You are one of my advisors. What do you *advise*?"

His advisor blinked red eyes at him in some confusion. Derailed from his train of thought he could not easily jump to the next subject. He shuffled his papers awkwardly as he searched for the "solution" part of his report. The other lords and ladies at the round table looked away from Lord Ervyre in embarrassment. Thalanil let out a hiss of breath. He should have simply let Lord Ervyre drone on until he got to the solution. Now it would take just as long for him to find it, but he was also ashamed. Thalanil's desire to be *done* with this for the day may have extended this tortuous meeting.

Finrael was out in the city today with Lord Camrys. Thalanil longed to be there with his son. He wanted to show Finrael every inch of Aymar, watch his son discover the beauties and wonders there, see him learning the language and loving the people as the people loved him back.

He shouldn't be surprised by how much he wanted to be with Finrael. His son was… *his son*. But there were plenty of fathers that didn't care to be with their children. His own had never truly had time for him, favoring Marikoth. Thalanil had not blamed him for that. He had favored Marikoth himself back then. Besides, he had his mother's love. He had been her favorite and she, he had always thought, was quite a bit more interesting than his father so he felt he had gotten the better deal.

Finrael is so like Maeve. Kind, brave and interested in everything, Thalanil thought with a smile. That smile faded a little. *Even about things--or especially about things--that he shouldn't be, like Death Magic.*

"If someone else would like to give their report while Lord Ervyre searches for that information I'm sure we would all be grateful," Thalanil said, but kept his tone

kind.

Lord Elidyr Paquen, a leader in the central states who was eager to bolster his own position at all times, froze as he read something from a page. “I have something to report. But it is not on crops. It is about your *son*.”

It was Thalanil’s turn to still. What did the odious Paquen wish to say about Finrael? But he kept himself composed as always and asked, “What about the Crown Prince?”

“Well, may I say that we all look forward to meeting him,” Lord Paquen said as he surveyed the note.

“What do you have there, Lord Paquen, that is so *engrossing* that I do not have your full attention?” Thalanil’s voice was soft, but dangerous.

Controlling the fractious Fae was always difficult. Since he’d had no apparent heir, there had been *hopes* that when the gods chose another Ravenspar to take the throne it would be from a certain cousin’s branch with whom the Paquens were aligned. Finrael’s appearance had dashed that hope.

Lord Paquen turned his eyes from the note to Thalanil. “It is a report of an incident that just took place in the city. It appears your son taught a hawker a lesson.”

Lord Paquen extended the note to Thalanil. He took it, unsure what that could possibly mean. Then he read. His stillness increased. Finrael had used Death Magic in the city. It had been in reaction to a young child thieving and a hawker threatening to hurt her *and* his son. He blinked slowly as he saw that Finrael had not killed the man. He had merely destroyed one of his fruits as an object lesson. In some ways, Thalanil could not be prouder of his son, but that he had used *Death Magic*...

It is the only magic he knows how to access and he was angry, Thalanil reminded himself. *I should start teaching him the right way to use magic or this will happen again.*

But part of him wondered if this wasn’t the *right* way for Finrael. But he pushed that aside. It made no difference that Finrael could do other types of magic than was usual for a Fae. He surely could use other powers as well without accessing that. But Thalanil did not--*could not*--show his dismay to his advisors. He looked up from the note, smoothing his fingers over it, and lifted an eyebrow.

“Prince Finrael did well to stop the hawker’s cruelty to a child,” he said with an unconcerned shrug.

Lord Paquen’s smile became a little stiff. “But *how* he did it was unusual.” He looked around at the other advisors, all dozen of them. “He *drained* the life of a piece of fruit.”

“Drained? I see that as a description here, but I don’t know what it means,” Thalanil lied easily as he shrugged again.

“Turned the fruit black and then to ash. There was nothing left of it,” Lord Paquen pressed.

“So he lit it on fire? Again--”

“Not on *fire*, my king. He drained it,” Lord Paquen insisted, his red eyes boring into Thalanil.

All of the advisors stared back at him. Even Lord Ervyre paused in his paper shuffling. Thalanil, of course, knew what Paquen was referring to: Death Magic. But the others seemed unimpressed.

“He killed a piece of fruit, did he?” Lady Finnea Beinelis chuckled. She had been one of his earliest and most loyal supporters. Her lands were on the sea in the east and she seemed to bring the cool, briney air with her. “How terrifying!”

"He *drained* it!" Lord Paquen hissed, his cheeks flaming.

"Oh, please, Elidyr, do you really expect us to get all worked up over a piece of fruit? Burned it. Drained it. Froze it. The hawker sounds like he got off easy," Lady Beinelis said with a shake of her head.

"It's not just a piece of fruit! Have you not all heard of the canyon that was formed near the forest road not five miles hence?" Lord Paquen asked.

Finrael had created that after absorbing too much of the overgrowth's life. He'd had to release it. And that had caused the canyon in Thalanil's understanding. The urge to *silence* Paquen flowed over Thalanil. He lowered his hands to his lap. He clenched them into fists. How dare this upstart speak of his son this way? How dare he?! And yet if Thalanil acted on this anger it would only add fuel to speculation about Finrael. He must act as if this was ludicrous. He cast a look at Lady Beinelis who read his intentions.

"And? Did Prince Finrael kill some trees, too?" Lady Beinelis laughed, but the rest did not.

They shifted uneasily. There had been tales of what his son had done and they had evidently reached his advisors' ears.

"He comes from nowhere. The king had no idea he existed. He has magic that bears a striking resemblance to… well, *other* members of the Ravenspar's most illustrious heritage that are not spoken of," Lord Paquen said.

"Lord Paquen, what is your point?" Lady Beinelis asked sharply. "Are you warning the king or us of something about Prince Finrael?"

"I am merely saying--"

"You have said too much," Thalanil interrupted. His voice was icy. "Lord Paquen, I know your disappointment in my having an heir. But to smear my son's reputation with these vague allegations--I don't even know what they are--is beneath even you."

Lord Paquen colored then paled. "I did not mean to suggest anything--"

"Don't insult our intelligence. Of course, you meant to suggest *something*!" Lady Beinelis scoffed.

"I'm merely reporting *facts*. If you don't want to hear what I have to say--"

"Stop speaking," Thalanil commanded.

He did not wish to hear what Lord Paquen had to say. Lord Paquen fell silent and looked down at the table. The other advisors remained silent too. It was like a pall had fallen over the room.

"Oh, King Thalanil, I have discovered the *solution* section of my report," Lord Ervyre said happily, breaking that ill silence. He shook one of the pages. "Well, it is somewhat of a solution. A partial solution. A temporary solution. But--"

"I would love to hear it, Lord Ervyre," Thalanil said, grateful for once for Lord Ervyre to drone on.

As Lord Ervyre began to speak again, Lady Beinelis gave Thalanil a smile and nod. They had bested Lord Paquen *today*. But rumors of his son's abilities would spread if Finrael kept using Death Magic. The overgrowth had already caused whispers that the gods were unhappy with his rule. His brother's return was not yet known. But if Finrael's ability to use Death Magic were revealed there would be more troubles. He wasn't so much worried for himself as his son. Appearing human would already put his son at a disadvantage in Fae society, but to be a Death Mage, too, would cause untold damage to Finrael's reputation.

Thalanil's gaze went to the glass doors again. He hoped that his son was enjoying himself and that whatever that hawker had done had not soured Finrael on the city.

That was when he saw them.

The Ostil.

The walking trees.

They had always existed in the forest, and they had never been gentle if their territory was breached, but now they attacked villages no matter where they were placed. But they had never *ever* attacked Aymar.

Until now.

He rose from his chair. Lord Ervyre paused in his droning and blinked at him. Thalanil offered no explanation as words were beyond him. He was across the room, ripping open the doors and stepping out onto the balcony before he consciously decided to move. The sunlight blinded him for a moment. But then his vision cleared. His eyes swept towards the sea of trees and the main road into Aymar. Even from this distance he could see the line of refugees, traders and animals streaming into Aymar. But he also saw the Ostil heading directly towards that line of people.

Hundreds of them! Going for the refugees on the road! They'll be killed!

"What's going on--oh, by the gods! Ostils?! Attacking Aymar? Madness!" Lady Beinelis cried.

There was a commotion behind him as more of the lords and ladies rushed to their feet and out onto the balcony.

"There are so many!" Lord Ervyre cried shrilly.

"What has inflamed them?" Lady Beinelis asked.

"Does it matter? They will kill all those people!" Lord Ervyre shook his head in horror.

"I will handle them," Thalanil said.

"We all will!" Lady Beinelis nodded as she turned to hurry out of the tower and down to the road.

Lord Paquen had come to the railing, but upon seeing all the Ostils and hearing Lady Beinelis' words retreated back into the tower. It was not a surprise. And he was not needed. No one else was.

Thalanil would not take the stairs. There was no time for that. He dove off of the balcony with shocked cries following him. Magic filled him as he fell. The wind whistled around him. His eyes narrowed as the wind stung him. Aymar's roof grew closer and closer. Time slowed. He took in a breath and arched back. Instead of falling he was *rising*. His magic surged through him.

Shadeheart, come to me!

There was a roar and suddenly his wyvern exploded out from the tower and flew straight towards him. Shadeheart flew beneath him and he let his body lower onto the wyvern's back. He willed the wyvern to fly towards the Ostils. Shadeheart let out a roar of delight. They were on the *hunt*.

Thalanil brought his hands together, forming balls of smoking ice between them. Fire would have been better under other circumstances, but the Ostils would blunder about in their pain and fear, setting large swaths of the forest on fire. Those flames would then pose as great a threat to the refugees as the Ostils. Still, ice would immobilize them.

"Shadeheart, dive!" Thalanil commanded.

They were over the road. The nearest Ostil had crashed through the treeline. He heard the shrill cries of the refugees. They tried to run away from the tree creatures, but the rapacious vines in the woods blocked their way, or worse, grabbed wrists and ankles and held them fast for the Ostils to crush or rip apart.

Thalanil sent the orbs of ice flying through the air towards the nearest Ostil who was rampaging in the road. Ice bloomed on the creature's legs, freezing it to the road. It let out a scream of rage as it tried to wrench the frozen roots from the stone. Thalanil reached above him into the air as he ripped a lightning bolt from the clear sky. The bolt hit the Ostil in the direct center of its head, splitting it down to its roots. Blackened and burning, it collapsed. He hissed as he realized that the lightning would still set the fires he feared. He sent a wave of wind at the flames. The wind was so powerful it snuffed out the fire rather than spread it.

The Ostils let out a low moan that carried like the cries of ghosts through the air at the death of their brethren. The sound was haunting and made the hair on the back of Thalanil's neck stand on end.

More of them came crashing out of the forest. The refugees screamed. A woman was swept up by the Ostil's branching arms. She was thrown into the air, tumbling head over feet, and would have likely snapped her neck on impact, but Thalanil caught her with his magic and set her on her feet out of immediate danger. She stared up at him in shock. She sent him only a faint smile before running towards Aymar. But he did not get to everyone in time.

The Ostils stormed the roadway. They crushed carts and their inhabitants underfoot. Sicen, maddened with fear, started to charge. They knocked refugees to the ground and trampled many to death.

The Ostils uprooted trees by their roots and used them as huge clubs. They would sweep them along the roadway, slamming into Fae bodies, crushing bones and organs. Blood and screams ran like rivers over the glowing white stones.

Many more would have died had not Thalanil taken out dozens of the Ostils with fire and ice and lightning. His fear of fire was diluted by the death these creatures doled out to his people. He sent streams of purple plasma that melted the creatures to piles of bubbling slag. Lightning splintered branchy limbs. Ice froze them in place while he set streams of fire to incinerate them. Some escaped back into the forest and set other trees aflame. He used wind to whip those flames towards more of the advancing creatures and create a defensive line. Shadeheart ripped off the creature's limbs and sent his own stream of flames towards them, letting out throaty cries of triumph as Ostils went down by the dozens.

But it was not enough.

And though he was not alone in the battle, there were not enough Mages to take them all on as few had been outside the walls when the attack began and those sending magic out from the walls could only send it so far. The main exit to Aymar was blocked by frantic, screaming people all trying to get in. So none of the Battle Mages or his advisors could get out that way. They had to leave Aymar by less traveled routes, which was taking time.

Too much time.

Thalanil and Shadeheart rose up far above the treeline to see the full situation. Though over a hundred of the Ostils were destroyed, he felt a wave of despair flow through him. There were *hundreds* more still coming. As far as he could see there were Ostils coming.

The only hope is to get all of these people behind Aymar's walls!

The irony that he was now depending on walls behind the Wall was not lost on him. But it would take too long. There was not enough room. He felt a welling of rage inside of him. The sky crackled above him with his magic. The sun was obscured. He extended his hands towards twenty oncoming Ostils. Lightning rained down from the heavens striking the creatures repeatedly. They let out those terribly low cries that echoed in his bones as they crashed to the forest floor. The crackling

of flames rose up from each corpse and started to spread. He sent another rain of lightning down against the creatures. More and more and more fell. More flames rose. Black smoke billowed into the air, choking him, but he kept going even as he felt his well of magic draining. If he didn't stop, the flames he created would soon be unstoppable.

But there were still hundreds of Ostil coming.

No… no… no… NO!

His one relief was that Finrael was inside of the city. His son was safe. He might not be able to save these people, but his son…

The cold hit him. His breath frosted. Shadeheart let out a roar of confusion and fear. Thalanil snapped his head towards where this cold was coming from. Black smoke passed before his vision, obscuring then revealing what was happening.

The road was filled with broken carts and broken bodies. Blood stained the stones. People were all pressed together like one living organism trying to get into the city, but the crowd was hardly moving as they were crushed against one another. But there were two figures on the road that stood between the people and the advancing Ostils.

One was his son.

The other was a female Fae that he did not know.

With a feeling of horror, he watched as his son got down from the horse he was riding, giving the Fae the reins of his horse. Then his son started walking *towards* the oncoming Ostils, picking his way through the dead.

"Finrael! No!" Thalanil cried as he turned Shadeheart to swoop down and pick up his son.

Finrael turned and looked up at him. The distance between them stopped him from reading his son's expression, but Finrael put up a hand, indicating that Thalanil was *not* to approach.

What is he doing? This is madness!

But, to Thalanil's shock, he found himself *compelled* to remain where he was. Shadeheart let out a cry of frustration as the wyvern, too, was stopped from going to his son. Finrael then continued his slow, deliberate walk towards the raging Ostils.

Another wave of arctic cold emitted from his son. It washed over Shadeheart and himself, sucking out his breath, and causing the wyvern to bobble in the air. He felt dizzy before he shook his head to focus on Finrael again.

The trees that bordered the row with their rapacious vines were blackened all around Finrael. But not from fire. He watched as they were drained to *nothing*. They turned to black ash and the ground was cleared. With every step Finrael took, more of the forest *died*. But the power that pulsed in his son was like a separate living thing. It snapped and snarled. It wanted out.

"Finrael…"

The Ostils were fifty feet away from his son. Their branch arms swept the ground in front of them, sending bodies, discarded belongings and broken carts out of their way to smash into the trees. There were so many of them that the whole road looked to be Ostils. But Finrael did not pause in his steady walk. He appeared completely unafraid.

Finally, he stopped twenty-five feet from them. He was extending a hand towards the creatures as if trying to reach them, communicate with them, urge them to go back. But the foremost Ostils charged him.

"NO!"

Thalanil reached for his magic, but his exhaustion was deeper than he realized and Finrael moved much faster. That extended hand suddenly curled toward

Finrael's chest as if he were luring the creatures to him. The distance shrank from twenty-five feet to twenty to fifteen to *ten*… and then it was as if the creatures hit a wall. The Ostils reared, clutching at their heads, before like the stationary trees they were kin too, they blackened and turned to *ash*. Blue-white light poured into Finrael. Thalanil's ears popped as if with pressure.

Too much magic. You've taken in too much, Finrael!

But Finrael seemed to know this. He thrust both his hands towards the other Ostils on the road. They were trying to back away, sensing that death was coming, but they couldn't move fast enough. A wave of blackness streaked with purple light poured from Finrael's hands and consumed the Ostils in a wave of pure Death Magic.

But Finrael was *not* done.

He brought his hands against his chest and a huge swath of the forest died around him as he drew in the life from the trees and vines to replenish his energy. And then Finrael began to *rise*. His feet left the road. He was rising up and up and up until he was *even* with Shadeheart and himself.

Thalanil saw that the Ostils were still coming, but they were slowing. He felt their confusion and fear. But they were maddened and wouldn't turn back. He knew that. Finrael turned his head to look back at Thalanil. His son's expression was so *sad*. But like Thalanil he *knew* that the Ostil had to be destroyed. Not just to stop them in their current rampage, but to make sure that they--*and no one else*--did this again.

"Finrael…"

His son turned back to face the storming Ostils. Thalanil felt the cold again. The forest below them *died*. And more of that black and purple magic streamed out towards the Ostils. They were destroyed. Dozens at a time. Then his son would drain others and repeat the process.

Death.

Death everywhere.

And he did not stop.

It seemed to go on forever.

Not even when the Ostil started to run did he stop. Finrael let *none* get away. Except for one. That one tottered where it stood, seemingly listening intently to something that Finrael was saying that only it could hear. Finrael allowed that creature to retreat.

To tell the others. To let them know that a Death Mage lives here and that they will die if they come.

The horizon was finally free of Ostils. The flames were mostly gone, too, as Finrael had absorbed all of the trees that were burning. He remained levitating there a hundred feet from Thalanil, staring at the empty forest and the devastation below. His son arched back and started to fall as if the full weight of all he'd done hit him at once.

"FINRAEL!"

Thalanil reached out with his magic and caught his falling son. He drew Finrael to him and Shadeheart, pulling the unconscious young man into his arms. Thalanil cradled his son against his chest. It was then that he saw that the front section of Finrael's hair had turned snow white.

"I've got you, Finrael. Your father has you," Thalanil breathed against his son's temple. "You're safe now."

But as he looked all around them, he knew in his heart that Finrael had been the one that had saved everyone. Yet would their people see it that way? Or would they

only see a Death Mage?

NO PLACE SAFE

Christopher smoothed his hands down the front of his dark brown tunic as he looked at himself in the full length mirror. The bruises were now mostly faint yellow stains on his skin since no fresh ones had overlaid the old because of new beatings. His shoulder was also almost quite recovered. Despite his sharpness about quack doctors, the king's physician was *not* one of those. She was an actual scientist and had given him anti-inflammatory herbs and told him to keep his arm in a sling for a week before seeing her again. She would reassess at that time if he needed other treatment. He truly was going to be *fine* as he had claimed before, but now he meant it.

He adjusted the collar of the black undershirt and cleaned off the slightest blemish on his knee-high leather boots. The clothes were of excellent quality. Nothing like Finn's of course, but something that a wealthy tradesman's son would wear. Something his father had always insisted he pretend to be. Oh, perhaps there had been a year or two after Christopher was born when his father truly was doing well financially, but that was a long time ago. Now he actually *was* financially stable rather than just *playing* like he was.

The king had not gifted him a fortune or a title, but he had a very nice room, warm, comfortable clothes, plenty of food and drink, a small but adequate stipend, and, most importantly, he had a laboratory again. Rohan had actually spoken about getting him a tutor to take the university entrance exams when things calmed down in the kingdom. His father had forbade him from entering academia, telling him that it would *decrease* his eligibility, but Christopher knew it was the cost of school that his father didn't want to pay.

Speaking of his father, Miles must not have told him about the Luminus, Finn or the king, because he had not shown up at Reave Castle despite three days having passed. Christopher knew that once his father had sobered up and heard Miles' tale, he would have come to "assure himself that his dear son wasn't causing any trouble" and "perhaps the king would be so amiable as to grace Tanglewood with a visit, no?" He felt nauseated just thinking of it. But his father had not come. And every moment that passed without him near caused Christopher to feel able to breathe easier.

One last adjustment of his tunic and he turned neatly on his heel to the door. He opened it up and almost crashed into Lord Serxio Lemos. He blinked.

"Lord Lemos!" Christopher cried. "You--you startled me."

"Indeed, I did! I think I startled myself. And it's Serxio, remember?" Serxio steadied what smelled like a breakfast sandwich in his hand.

Christopher's stomach gurgled. He hadn't eaten since last night's dinner or was it lunch? He couldn't remember.

“Ah, what can I do for you, Lord… Serxio?” he asked, even as he was anxious to get past the lord and get back to his work. He liked Serxio just fine, as much as he liked anyone.

“It’s what I can do for *you*.” Serxio smiled.

Christopher frowned. He couldn’t imagine what Serxio meant. He realized then that they were standing in the hallway. “Would you like to come in?”

He gestured to his bedroom which was spic and span even though he did not allow any servants inside. Serxio looked around him into the room with interest, but then he pulled back and shook his head.

“No, no, another time. I know you want to get to your lab! Leonid said that if I wanted to bring you breakfast that it needed to be *to go* and I wasn’t to hold you back from what you wanted to do, even if I was worried about you!” Serxio abruptly stopped as if he had said too much.

“You’re… worried about… me?” Christopher touched his chest as if indicating himself physically as well as orally would make things clearer in his head.

“Yes, you’re not eating enough. You need to eat more. And you’re sleeping just a few hours a night. You keep your room so clean it’s like nobody lives in it. I’m afraid that you think you’re going to be sent away and you’re not!” Serxio burbled out.

That caused Christopher’s eyebrows to rise. “I--I appreciate your concern. But I need little sleep. My mind doesn’t let me rest… easily. And, as to food…” His stomach audibly gurgled again. “I forget to eat when I am deep in my work. The potion that King Rohan took from Marikoth is… challenging and fascinating. I will discover its secrets.”

Serxio blinked at his intensity. “Well, I dare say you will! And here! I remembered breakfast for you.”

The breakfast sandwich was thrust into his hands. The wax paper was a little oily, but the scent was delicious. He brought it up to his nose and sniffed it. His stomach gurgled more.

“Thank--thank you, Serxio. I appreciate this,” Christopher said.

“No need to thank me! You’re Finn’s brother!” Serxio beamed at him and awkwardly patted his uninjured arm. “Well, I’ll let you get to work. I promise I won’t disturb you until lunch, that is!”

“You don’t need to do that. I will make a reminder to go to the kitchens--”

“It’s no bother.” Serxio continued to beam. “Leonid says I mostly think of myself so… you’re giving me a chance to prove him wrong.”

“I’m glad to be of some use.”

Christopher had lifted the sandwich as if in salute and walked quickly past Serxio. His heart was in his throat. Sweat coated his palms.

I’ve done nothing wrong. I’ve done what Finn asked. I even confessed the type of person I am, Christopher told him. *Some of it anyways. I’m not benefiting unduly from being Finn’s… brother.*

But he wondered if Serxio would really be bringing him breakfast sandwiches, let alone lunch later, if he knew how badly he’d treated Finn. He had to prove his worth individually so that he was here on his own merit and not because of Finn’s light.

The laboratory was down in the castle’s cellars, down near the old catacombs. There were no windows and it was far away from any people for safety’s sake. That suited Christopher just fine. He was alone. He would not be bothered. He could focus. Because figuring out the potion was not just a point of pride, a puzzle that needed solving, but also the way to prove himself as an alchemist once and for all.

He hustled down the stairs, eating his sandwich greedily. People nodded and said hello to him, which he responded to curtly. Some of them might have been kind or even simply polite, but many knew he was a favorite of the king. He would not help anyone advance. Not unless it suited him.

He made it to the cellars. Despite it being underground, it was well lit and the hallways were relatively airy. There were fifteen-foot arched ceilings and the hallways were just as wide. It was cool down here, some would say a little chilly, but that was better for his equipment.

My beautiful equipment. A perfect set up. Anything and everything I wanted.

He turned into a side hallway that had his laboratory to the right and the final set of stairs to the catacombs where the royals of Rirea had been interred for ages. He didn't know if Rohan ever visited his ancestors at any other time, but he hadn't seen him down here since the laboratory had been put together. No one had been.

Except…

Christopher froze as he saw King Tearlach walking up the catacomb's steps. The Achuvien king met his eyes and *smiled*. He didn't seem concerned at all about being where he should not. After all, what would he want with the royal dead? But he was relieved that the man had not been poking around at Marikoth's books or his equipment.

"What brings you down here, King Tearlach?" Christopher asked coolly, crossing his arms at the wrists behind his back.

The man wasn't wearing his black armor, but he was wearing a black doublet, leggings and boots. It made his light coloring all the more startling. He was not hiding his difference, but highlighting it. Which was definitely a choice in Christopher's mind.

"I was checking on the dead. I'm sure you recall that they've been walking around these days." He gestured back to the catacombs' stairs. "All we need is for the undead to start stirring beneath our feet."

"I suppose that makes sense," Christopher said, but he wasn't quite sure that was true. "Though Marikoth would have to get down here and through the locked gate, but I suppose that wouldn't be difficult for a Death Mage, would it?"

"I wouldn't put anything past him. But the gate remains locked and I saw no movement among the bones of the dead. But perhaps he needs *fresher* corpses for this to work."

"I am finding no need for tissue--fresh or desiccated--for the potion to work," Christopher said and grimaced. He shouldn't have said so much.

The Achuvien king's eyebrows lifted. "Now you've found out much in a few days!"

He chuckled as he said it, but the laughter didn't reach his eyes, which were cold and steady on Christopher.

"Not enough, but some," Christopher's voice was clipped.

"I am quite impressed! But I'm not surprised after what you said the other evening when we were all around the Luminus." Tearlach walked slowly towards him, a smile on his lips.

"I don't know what you mean." Christopher took a step back, but then firmed his stance.

"When you *confessed*," Tearlach chuckled, "to being such a bad, bad person."

"I was."

Tearlach's eyebrows rose again. "*Was*?"

Christopher said nothing.

“You read that room!” Tearlach chuckled. “You know your brother’s good heart. But you also figured out what the people in that room wanted to hear. You confessed to your sins in such a way that you would *benefit* from it.”

Christopher continued in silence.

Tearlach wagged a finger at him. “Clever, clever. And now you have a sweet setup here. Your alchemy lab--which you are evidently good at, very good--and a life free of your abusive father and your own *questionable* past.”

“If there’s nothing else, I have work to do,” Christopher said.

Tearlach laughed darkly. “Oh, yes, you are a clever, clever boy! I look forward to seeing what you do next.”

The Achuvien king then strolled down the hallway and was soon out of sight. Christopher breathed deeply as soon as he was sure he was alone. Tearlach was dangerous. He wasn’t a good person like Rohan and his brother, along with Serxio and Leonid. No, he was as cold as the dead he claimed to be checking on.

Christopher frowned. Tearlach’s explanation for being down here was *possible*. But he thought like Christopher did. Instead of thinking up some lie, Tearlach might have told the truth. Well, a version of it. He crumpled the breakfast sandwich wrapper and tucked it in his pocket. He would not litter his area. But he didn’t go into his laboratory. Instead, he headed down the stairs to the catacombs. He only took a few steps before he froze.

The gate that Tearlach had claimed was *locked* was, in fact, unlocked and *open*. There were shadows moving in the crypt and the creak of *bones* and old sinew struggling to walk.

I need to tell the others!

But that was all he got a chance to do as someone struck him on the back of the head and everything went black.

DANGEROUS AWARENESS

Finn drifted just below the surface of consciousness. He bobbed like a cork in the sea rising up and down in the waves of his mind. He thought he heard the flapping of wings every once in a while. They were both haunting and comforting.

You did well, the voice that was and wasn't his own said. It was the raven. *I admit… I'm impressed.*

Impressed? Because I killed? Finn asked. *I tried to calm them like I did the one in the village, but they wouldn't listen.*

They needed you to act. For too long the world has been unbalanced, the raven told him. *Now, steps needed to be taken.*

To kill them all? Finn cried.

Death is a part of life. A necessary part, the raven said. *You are that death. The embodiment of death. Death's Chosen.*

Finn could hear the capital in the word *Chosen*. *What? I don't understand!*

These powers you bear come from the gods, Finn. Well, one god. From me, the raven said.

You're a god?

There was a *caw* of annoyance. *Come now! Surely you guessed when Marikoth fell apart.*

Finn heard the whisper of wings and he thought of the raven that Marikoth had so feared. *Marikoth thought he was your Chosen, didn't he?*

He assumed too much. He was exiled, not Chosen. One does not mean the other, the raven said.

He would eagerly kill for you. Bring death to the world, Finn said.

Yes, he would, but all death is not balance, is it?

No, Finn said. *No, it isn't. So what does Death's Chosen do?*

But the raven didn't answer. Instead, Finn rose up on a swell of consciousness and he heard other voices. His father's. Ryleth's.

"... there is nothing I can do. My understanding of Death Magic is rudimentary, because your family banned all research on it!" Ryleth sounded strained.

"You would blame me for my son's condition?!" His father sounded offended and scared.

"No, no, just… I don't know how to help him. If anyone does they would be in your family, King Thalanil. Yours is the line that produced them," Ryleth gentled her tone. "Surely, there is someone in your family who knows about Death Magic."

His father was silent for long moments. Finn thought he had sunk down deeper into unconsciousness again and lost them. But no. His father had merely been thinking.

“My father must know,” Thalanil’s voice sounded thick. “He loved Marikoth beyond anyone, second only to our mother. He would have researched everything.”

“Is he not in… in exile?” Ryleth asked.

“Yes, he does not even accept communications via Luminus. I must go there in person,” his father said. “But I do not want to leave Finrael.”

“I will stay with him. Every moment. I think he is just asleep as he was last time he used too much of his magic,” she said. “He will likely wake normally. But that doesn’t mean we don’t need answers *quickly*. His powers are growing.”

“Yes, but now all know what he is,” Thalanil intoned. “And they know the prophecy that a Death Mage will destroy the Empire.”

“You know that isn’t true,” Ryleth said. “It’s prejudice and fear, pure and simple.”

“My father did not think that.”

“He didn’t kill Marikoth. He exiled him. So maybe he wasn’t so sure,” Ryleth pointed out.

His father was silent again, but then he said, “While I am gone, if you need assistance seek out Lady Beinelis. She is my greatest supporter. She will help you keep Finrael safe.”

“I will protect your son with my life,” Ryleth pledged.

“I see why Finrael likes you, trusts you,” his father murmured.

“I see him. I am not afraid. And you should not be either.” He imagined her lifting an eyebrow at his father.

“I am not afraid *of* him. I am afraid *for* him,” his father answered. He felt his father’s lips lightly pressed against his forehead. “I love you, Finrael. I will be back with the answers you need.”

With his father’s last words, Finn dove back again into unconsciousness. He rode the dark waves and rested. But then there was a *light*. Like at the end of a tunnel. Finn swam towards it. He realized it wasn’t just light. It was an image. A moving image like what he had seen in the Luminus, but that’s not what this was.

The Eye of the Raven… that’s what this is! Someone I love is in danger!

He was seeing an eagle-eyed view of Reave Castle. He slowly swooped towards the double-doored entrance. He flew inside of the castle and then he wound down stairs upon stairs upon stairs until he was at the deep base of the castle in the rock. He soared down the hallway until he reached a final set of stairs.

There was a gate there. An open gate. And the undead were shambling out of it.

The Story Continues in Cinders & Ashes Book 4!

T you so much for reading Cinders & Ashes 3. I sincerely hope you enjoyed it!

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Thank you again for your support!

X. Aratare/Raythe